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ABSTRACT

This book introduces students to the people and country of Laos. The historic "Land of a Million Elephants" (Lan Xang) is filled with diversity and wonder. This book provides background information and suggested topics for an intensive study of the country. The seven chapters are entitled: (1) "Land and People"; (2) "Society and Culture: Lowland Lao"; (3) "Society and Culture: Highland Lao"; (4) "Early History"; (5) "Colonialism and Independence"; (6) "War and Revolution"; and (7) "Laos and Laotians Today." Tables, diagrams, graphs, and maps illustrate the text. A 67-item glossary, bibliography, resource list, and answer key conclude the book. (EH)

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LAOS AND LAOTIANS

BY
MEG REGINA RAKOW

Center for Southeast Asian Studies
School of Hawaiian, Asian and Pacific Affairs
University of Hawaii
1992

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Finally, I thank my husband, Rick, for his encouragement and patience during the many hours I spent writing. My gratitude will never match your wisdom and friendship.

I would like to dedicate this book to Laotian young people, wherever they live, and to encourage them to cherish forever in their hearts their fine traditions and history. Remember your grandparents' proverb:

Food not eaten will become rotten;
old things not told will be forgotten.

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Land and People

Introduction

Imagine riding on a huge Asian elephant as it lumbers through green jungle, across plateaus and raging rivers, and through many small rice-growing villages. You are traveling through the historic "Land of a Million Elephants" **(Lan Xang)** on a journey to explore the heart of the mountainous country called Laos.

Being an observant traveler you note many differences between Laos and your own country. Traveling by elephant is probably a good idea because there are far fewer roads and businesses here and more jungle. When the midday sun is at its hottest, the local people are very hospitable. Families invite you to share a meal on the shaded porch of their home, which sits on stilts. The local food is spicy, the rice is sticky, and the mood is relaxed.

Services that you take for granted at home, such as electricity and running water are available only in the largest Laotian cities, situated mostly along the Mekong river. The farther you travel from the emerald rice fields of the river valleys into the country's steep, wild mountains, the more independent and self-sufficient the people are. You are so impressed by the people, both by their diverse local traditions and their ability to endure droughts, floods, invasions, colonialism, and war, that upon your return you pick up this book to learn more about Laos and Laotians.

Geography

In order to understand how people live, you must know where they live. Laos, known formally as the Lao People's Democratic Republic, lies between latitude 14 and 22.5 north of the equator. It is the only landlocked country in Southeast Asia. Northern Laos is mostly rugged mountains and covers about three-fifths of the country's total land area. Southern Laos, known as the "panhandle" because of its long, narrow shape, makes up the remaining two-fifths of the approximately ninety one thousand square miles of Laos.

Laos' approximately 4.1 million citizens are surrounded by powerful neighbors as shown in the table below.

Table 1. LAOS' NEIGHBORS

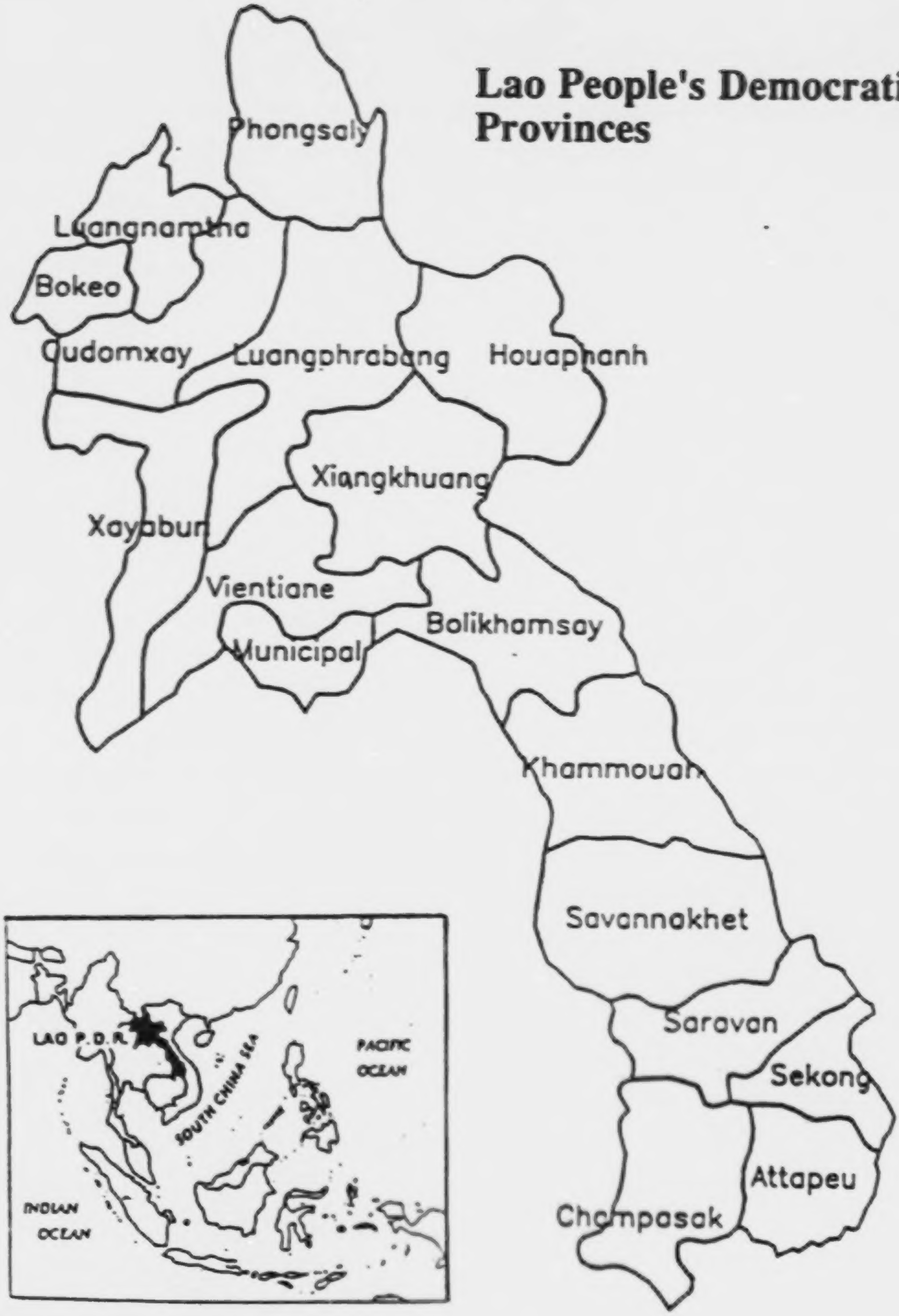
COUNTRY	POPULATION (in millions)	DIRECTION FROM LAOS	LENGTH OF BORDER WITH LAOS
Myanmar	42.6	northwest	143 miles
Cambodia	8.4	south	306 miles
China	1,152.5	north	258 miles
Thailand	56.3	west	1,074 miles
Vietnam	68.2	east	1,215 miles

Modern travelers can fly from neighboring countries over Laos to Vientiane, the capital city, in just a few hours. But in 1641, when one of the first Western visitors to Laos, a Dutch trader named Van Wuysthoff, traveled up the Mekong river to Vientiane from the Cambodian city of Phnomh Penh, the trip took more than a hundred days. As Van Wuysthoff probably discovered, mountains and the Mekong are the dominant physical features of Laos.

The Mekong is the longest river in Southeast Asia and one of the largest in the world. It originates in the Himalayan mountains in Tibet, crosses southern China, passes east of Burma, and flows through the Southeast Asian countries of Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. The Mekong river is the international border between Thailand and Laos for some five hundred miles.

According to Lao legends, the Mekong was built by a dragon king during his quarrel with another dragon. Some people still believe that the river is inhabited by dragons and that it has a life of its own. The river and its tributaries help the Laotian people, who rely on it for fish, the irrigation of lowland rice and vegetable gardens, hydroelectricity in the cities, and transportation.

Lao People's Democratic Republic: Provinces


Phongsaly
Luangnamtha
Bokeo
Oudomxay
Luangphrabang
Houaphanh
Xiangkhuang
Xayabury
Vientiane
Municipal
Bolikhamsay
Khammouan
Savannakhet
Saravan
Sekong
Attapeu
Champasak
LAO P.D.R.
SOUTH CHINA SEA
PACIFIC OCEAN
INDIAN OCEAN

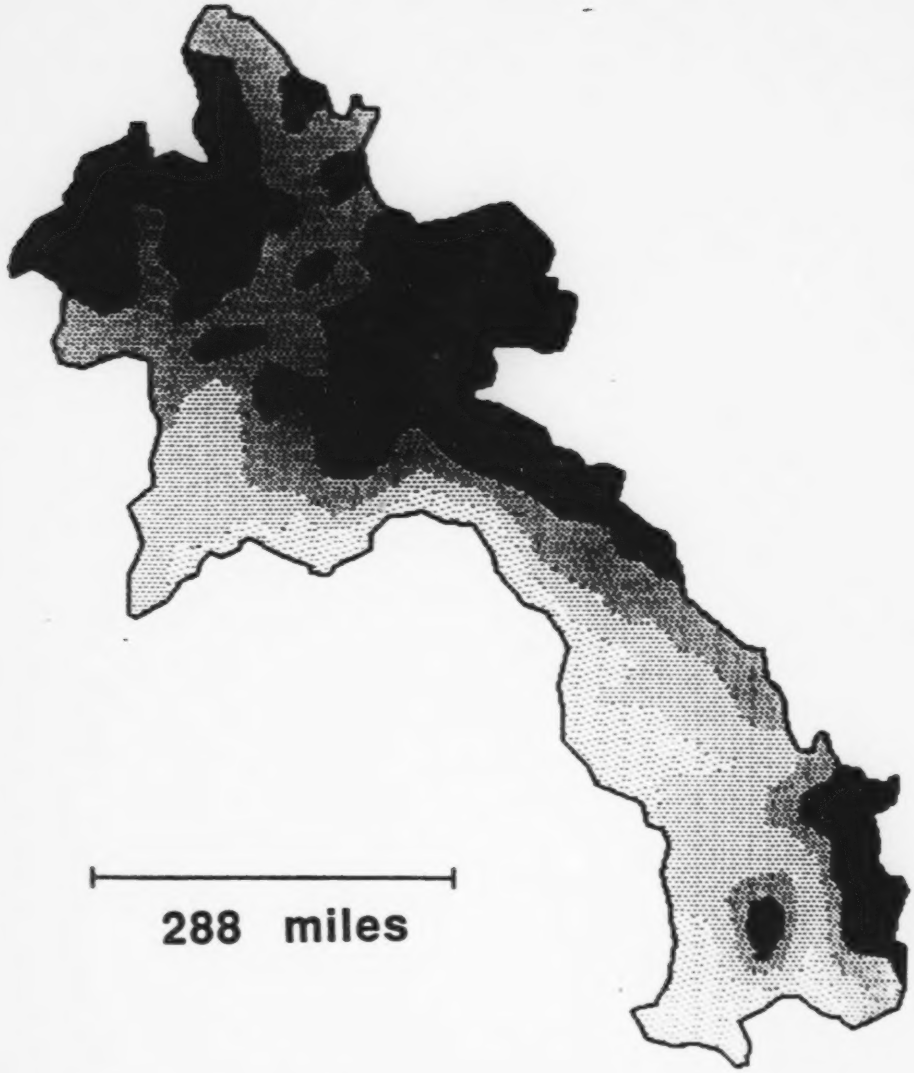
In the centuries before roads, Lao products, such as gold and teak wood and other forest products traveled down the Mekong's tributaries to the gulf of Siam, while cloth and "looking glasses" were brought by *sampan* traders to Laos. Today Laos is disadvantaged by being a landlocked country. Exports and imports must pass through the Annamite mountains to the Vietnamese port of Vinh on the gulf of Tonkin, or be ferried across the Mekong river to Thailand, bound for Bangkok near the gulf of Thailand. The first bridge across the Mekong between Thailand and Laos is now being built to link the Thai border town of Nong Khai with the Lao capital, Vientiane. In the meantime, river traffic is very important for trade and commerce in Laos.

Besides connecting Laos with the rest of Southeast Asia and the world, the Mekong runs the entire length of the country. It flows for more than a thousand miles through or on the border of Lao territory. It is interrupted by four sets of unnavigable rapids at points north of Ban Houei Sai, south of Luang Phrabang, south of Savannakhet at Khemmarat, and the eight miles of cataracts at Khone near the Cambodian border. The three navigable stretches of the Mekong river correspond to the three regions of Laos: southern, central and northern Laos.

Topography

Laos is a country of rivers and mountains. More than ninety percent of the land is more than six hundred feet above sea level. The wet-rice-growing lowlands are located along the Mekong river, mostly in the southern part of the country. The northern terrain is creased and folded much like the accordion-pleated skirts worn by the girls of the *Hmong* hill tribes who live in the northern mountains. The highest mountain in Laos is Phu Bia (9,242 feet), once the stronghold of Hmong troops who fought Laotian and Vietnamese communists during the Vietnam War. The northern mountains, foothills of the Himalayan range, rise steeply from the V-shaped valleys, where streams tumble down toward the Mekong river.

The southern and central regions are bordered on the east by the peaks of the Annamite mountains, which are called Phu Luang in the Lao language. They run north to south along the length of the country, separating Laos from Vietnam. Most of the population is settled along the valleys of the Mekong or along the eleven other main rivers, which drain from the mountains into the Mekong on the western border.



LAOS Population: 4.1 million Area: 91,438 square miles

ELEVATION (in feet) ■ over 3200 ▩ 1648-3200

▦ 656-1648 ▒ under 656

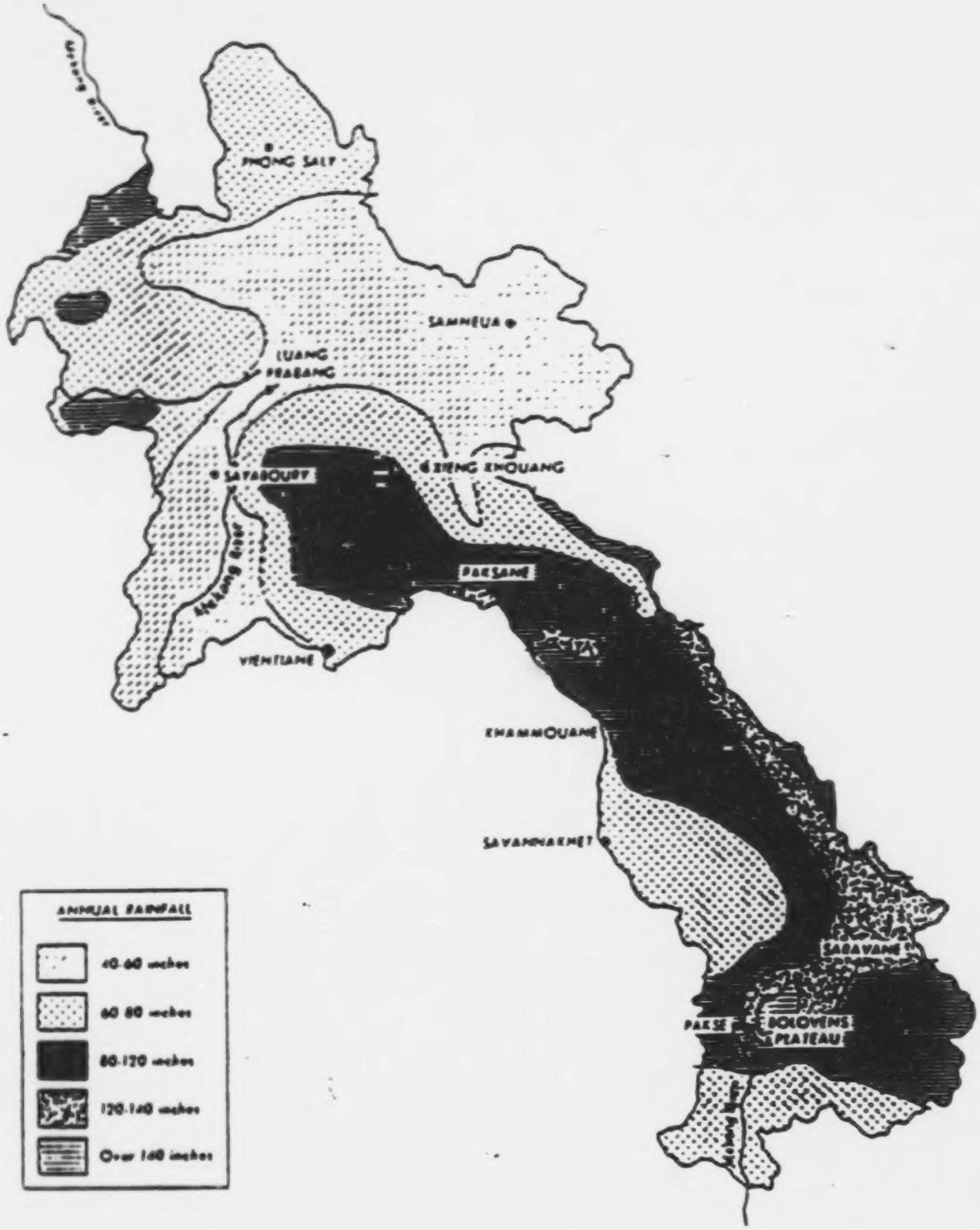
There are are three major plateaus: the Bolovens in the southern province of Champasak, the Cammon in the central province of Khammouan, and the Plain of Jars in the northeastern province of Xiang Khuang. The Bolovens plateau is famous for its fertile volcanic soil, good for growing fruits and cash crops. The Plain of Jars poses a mystery. No one knows the origin of the hundred or more ancient stone jars found on this high plateau. They are bigger than a person and too heavy to move. Some say they were funeral urns for an ancient civilization. In one legend the jars were said to have been filled with liquor to celebrate the expulsion of Vietnamese invaders. The jars, the survivors of countless wars, stand as silent witnesses to Laotian history.

Climate

Rice agriculture, the core of life in Laos, depends on the *monsoon*. One Lao writer has described the importance of the rains:

> The "sky waters" motivate our sticky rice to flourish in the fields and make our fruits grow. . . . You would also witness a multitude of ceremonies by our Lao peasants to induce the spiritual forces, the unseen supernatural beings, to save them from disasters such as drought or too heavy storms which would kill their crops. Most of all, the rainy season in Laos is an excellent time to educate our children in the countryside where the absence of schools has been a rule rather than an exception. The Lao family life develops intensively during this period of time, and you would be surprised to observe how the monsoon rain has enriched the Lao literature and many other aspects of the Lao culture.

Winds blow from the Indian ocean in May bringing warm air and rains. The southwest monsoon rains, heaviest during July and August, last until late October and may shower the Lao countryside with up to a foot of rain per month, depending on the region. There is a lot of precipitation along the Annamite mountain chain. The Bolovens plateau gets the heaviest rainfall, while the northern provinces of Sam Neua and Luang Phrabang get the least. The level of the Mekong river at Vientiane may rise almost thirty feet from its April low to its August torrent. Mud is everywhere, floods are common, and travel is difficult- except by water.


Mekong River
PHONG SALY
SAMNEUA
LUANG PRABANG
SAYABOURY
XIENG KHOUANG
Mekong River
PAKSANE
VIENTIANE
KHAMMOUANE
SAVANNAKHET
SARAVANE
PAKSE
BOLOVENS PLATEAU
Mekong River
ANNUAL RAINFALL
40-60 inches
60-80 inches
80-120 inches
120-160 inches
Over 160 inches

MEAN ANNUAL RAINFALL IN LAOS

The northeast monsoon winds bring the cool, dry season to Laos from November through February. People who live in the northeastern mountains, which are five to six thousand feet high, shiver through chilly nights of 30° The southern jungles are much hotter. In the "cool" month of December, temperatures may peak at about 70°F, and in the hot season at more than 100°F. As the rains cease, the flood waters drop and the river banks become green oases with vegetables planted in the new silt.

Throughout the country, April is the hottest and driest month of the year, with average temperatures between 72°and 93°F. It is also the first month of the Lao New Year, which is celebrated by throwing scarce water about for fun, and freeing fish and birds to earn Buddhist merit.

Because most Laotians are farmers, their livelihoods are greatly affected by climatic changes, such as the floods and droughts suffered in 1987 and 1988. Many Laotian beliefs and ceremonies reinforce the religious and social ties that bind Laotians together during famines as well as abundant harvests.

Natural Resources

Unlike its neighbors, much of Laos is still covered in natural forests. Of the total land area in Laos, it is estimated that forty-seven percent was thick forest in 1981 as compared with seventy percent in 1940. The forests of Laos, varying from tropical rain forest to scrub, have been harvested on a small scale for centuries. The forests contain such natural riches as teak, rosewood, pine, bamboo, gum benzoin, resin, and sticklac. Benzoin is an ingredient in ointments and perfumes. Sticklac, produced by a forest insect, is used in varnish and lacquerware. The leaves, roots, and animals of the forest are also valued ingredients in herbal medicines.

The forests and jungles are home to many kinds of rare and exotic wildlife, such as bears, cranes, crocodiles, deer, elephants, leopards, lizards, monkeys, pheasants, snakes, squirrels, tigers, wild oxen, and buffalo. The forests are essential to the many rural Laotians who rely on them for housing materials, firewood, tools, medicines, and wild foods, such as plants and game.

Since the Thai government banned commercial logging of its forests in 1989, exports of wood from Laos to Thailand have increased rapidly, especially from Xayaburi and other border provinces. Environmental experts are concerned about the damage to Laotian forests caused by commercial logging as well as the *slash and burn agriculture* practiced by highland farmers. Approximately 1.5 million Laotians practice shifting cultivation, especially in the north, where it is estimated that a majority of the population are slash and burn farmers. Some scientists predict that if the current rate of deforestation continues, Laos' forest area might drop to twenty-five percent its total land area in the next ten years.

Despite valuable mineral resources, mining in Laos is limited to tin mining in Khammouan province, gypsum mining in Savannakhet, salt production near Vientiane, and gold-panning in the Mekong river near Luang Phrabang. There are coal deposits in Saravan and Vientiane provinces, and copper near Attapeu and Xiang Khuang. The latter province is known for its high grade iron ore deposits. Lead, zinc and potash are also found in Laos.

Because of its many rivers, Laos is rich in water resources. The country exports electricity to Thailand from the Nam Ngum dam, built by the United States and other international donors during the Vietnam War. In 1984 exported electricity accounted for eighty-five percent of the total value of Lao exports, but lately timber has become the top foreign exchange earner. The production of electricity for export depends on good weather and the fragile environment. Because of recent droughts and deforestation, the water level in the Nam Ngum dam has dropped dramatically; electricity production was cut in half in 1987 and by twenty percent in the following year.

Agriculture

Most Laotians eke out a living from practicing traditional agriculture. Rice is the main crop in this *subsistence economy*. It is grown in fertile river valleys as well as on the **hai** fields, which highland peoples clear to burn, cultivate, and later abandon. Most farmers in Laos plant only one crop of rice a year to coincide with the rainy season, while Thai and Vietnamese farmers may plant two to three crops with the help of irrigation systems, fertilizers, and modern cultivation techniques.

Corn, sweet potatoes, and vegetables are grown to supplement the farmers' diets. Silk and cotton are grown mainly for making cloth, which is handwoven on looms kept beneath the family house. Coffee, tea, soybeans, tobacco, spices and livestock are grown for trading by farm families to buy consumer items such as cooking pots, bicycles, soap, and salt, and to exchange for the cash needed to contribute to local parties and religious festivities.

Table 2. ESTIMATES OF AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION IN LAOS, 1990

AGRICULTURAL PRODUCT	NATIONAL PRODUCTION (total tons)	PROVINCE LEADING PRODUCTION
Rice (upland)	380,824	Luang Phrabang
Taro and sweet potato	162,745	Xiang Khuang
Sugarcane	111,913	Vientiane municipality
Vegetables	60,681	Champasak
Maize	81,888	Oudomxay
Tobacco	58,401	Champasak
Rice (irrigated)	39,101	Vientiane municipality
Peanuts	8,034	Oudomxay
Coffee	5,322	Champasak
Cotton	4,990	Xayaburi
Soybeans	4,536	Phongsaly
Mungbeans	2,609	Champasak
Tea	1,616	Champasak

The Peoples of Laos

Approximately 4.1 million Laotians live in Laos, an area roughly the size of the state of Oregon. Less than twenty percent of the population live in cities; most live in the country. Unlike many places in the world, Laos still has enough land to support its population, which is growing quickly. Of the twenty thousand square miles suitable for agriculture in Laos, only about one-third is currently cultivated.

While the average farm size in the U.S. is 456 acres, the average family farm in Laos is about four acres worked by a family of six. Most farm families raise just enough rice and other foods for home consumption and a humble existence. In 1988 the United Nations estimated per capita income in Laos at U.S.$160, compared with $13,123 in the United States.

"Lao" is sometimes misunderstood. When it is used to denote ethnicity, it may also include people from northeastern Thailand but not many of the hill tribes in Laos. More ethnic Lao live in Thailand than in Laos. The Lao are the largest of the many ethnic groups that live in Laos. In addition to the Lao, who live mainly in the lowland areas, there are tribal groups, such as the Kammu and the Hmong. The tribal peoples tend to live in the mountainous areas and have their own languages and cultures. However, all citizens of Laos are called Laotians, whatever their ethnicity.

Despite its small size , Laos contains many different cultures and peoples. The social fabric of Laos can be likened to the beautiful cloth woven and embroidered by Laotian women. There are many threads, many colors, and much variety. It is the task of the modern state to integrate all of this diversity: to weave one nation from many threads.

In addition to the ethnic Lao, estimated at half of the national population, the government recognizes 68 ethnic groups as Laotians. This diversity is partly due to geography. The mountainous terrain of Laos makes travel difficult. There are few roads, radios, televisions, or telephones so villages remain isolated and cultural distinctions remain strong.

Experts often classify the people of Laos in three groups:

Table 3. LAOTIAN ETHNIC GROUPS (% OF NATIONAL POPULATION)

GROUPS	PERCENT OF POPULATION	HABITAT
Lao Loum	56%	River valleys and mountains
Lao Theung	34%	Mountainsides
Lao Sung	9%	Mountain peaks

The remaining one percent are of foreign descent, including Chinese or Vietnamese.

Lowland Laotians- Lao Loum

The majority of the population of Laos lives along the broad alluvial plains of the Mekong river. These lowland Lao have been the dominant political and cultural group for most of the country's history, and their tonal

T'ai language is the national language. Lowland Lao are distinguished by five characteristics:

1. They live in houses built on posts six to eight feet above the ground.
2. They wear skirts of wrapped cloth instead of pants.
3. They eat with their hands or use spoons and forks instead of chopsticks.
4. They prefer to eat *glutinous* rice.
5. Most practice *Theravada* Buddhism.

No one is certain where the Lao Loum came from or when they arrived in Laos. Some theories say they originated in the valley of Dien Bien Phu, in what is now northwestern Vietnam. Others believe they migrated from southern China. The Lao Loum settled to practice irrigated agriculture in the Mekong river plain.

The category of ethnic Lao also includes culturally related groups, such as the Lao Phuan, the Lao Yuan, the Lu, the Tai Neua and the mountain T'ai, who are classified into different groups according to the colored costumes of their women; Black T'ai, Red T'ai and White T'ai. Like their lowland cousins, the mountain T'ai plant sticky rice, which they irrigate by terracing systems, and live in stilt houses. Most mountain T'ai are *animists*. Some migrated to Laos from northern Vietnam.

Mountainside Laotians- Lao Theung

According to most historians, the Lao Theung, or highlanders, were the original inhabitants of what is now Laos. After the Lao migrated to the country that now bears their name, the original *Mon-Khmer* peoples moved into the hills. Today their descendants (the Kammu, Lamet, Loven, and others) live mainly in southern Laos near the Bolovens plateau or in the north near China and Vietnam.

The Lao Theung culture centers around small, mobile village groups. A village group will clear a place on the forest hills at an elevation of around thirty-five hundred feet and build long, rectangular stilt homes of wood and woven bamboo, which several families may share. Villagers subsist by clearing upland fields, which they burn and then plant with rice, corn, taro, and tobacco, and by hunting and collecting forest products for trade. When the soil loses its fertility after several years of use, the village moves on. Most

Lao Theung are animists, placating spirits with animal sacrifices to ensure plentiful crops and good health.

Mountain peak Lao- Lao Sung

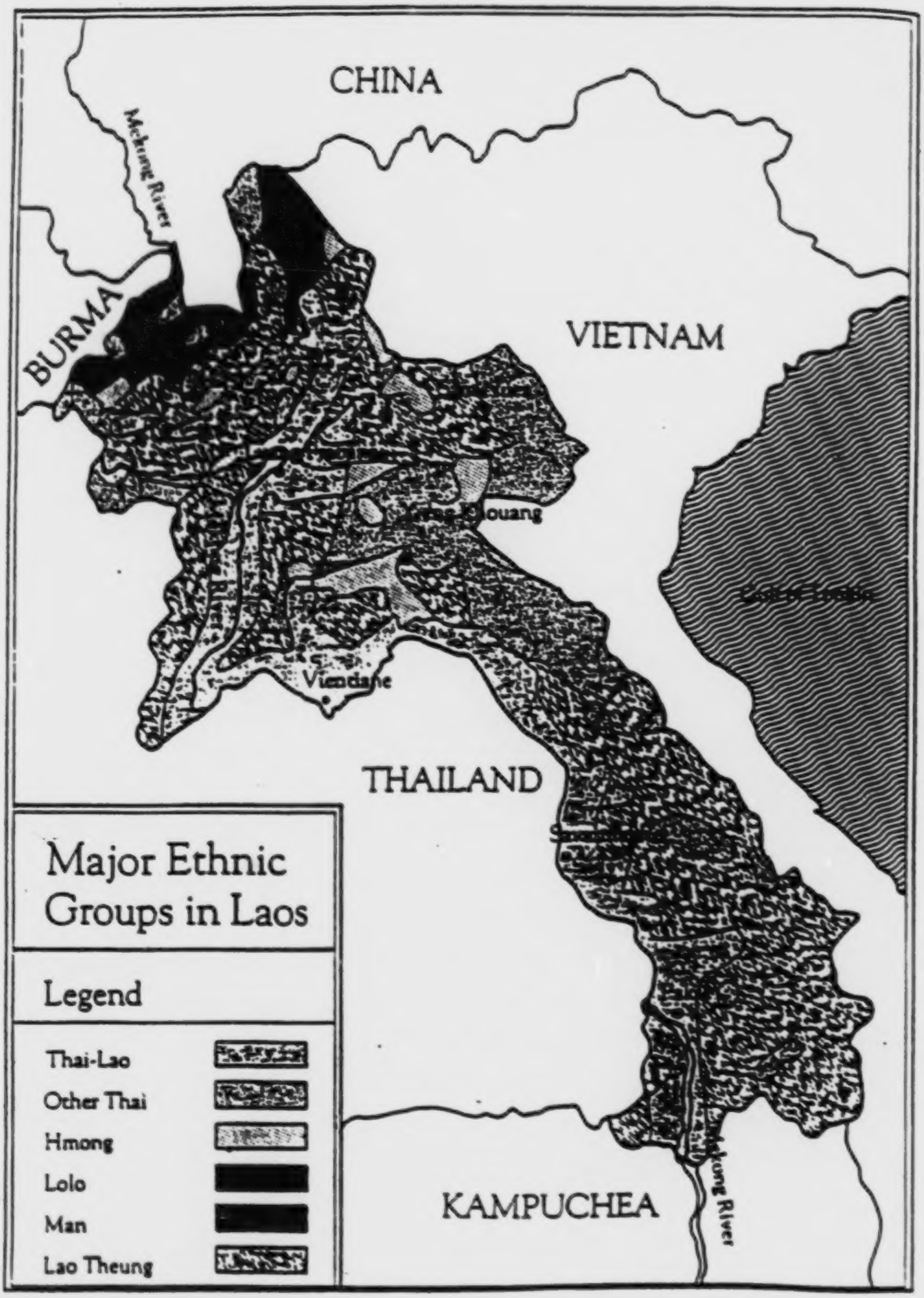
The peoples of the high mountain peaks, such as the Hmong and the Mien, are the smallest in number and the most recent arrivals from China. It is believed that groups of Lao Sung migrated to Laos from southern China less than two hundred years ago, as well as to the mountains of Thailand and Vietnam.

The Hmong are the largest group of Lao Sung, even though many Hmong left Laos as refugees to go to the United States and other countries after the end of the war in Indochina in 1975. Most of the Hmong in Laos live in small villages built at elevations from four to nine thousand feet. According to one source, there are twenty-three Hmong clans, and members of a village usually belong to the same clan.

Like the Lao Theung, the Lao Sung exist by clearing, burning, and then planting fields claimed from the forests. In addition to cultivating rice and food crops, the Hmong are famous for growing opium and selling it to lowland traders, who export it.

The Lao Sung differ from other Laotians in that they build their houses directly on the ground. The houses are made of wood hand-hewn with an axe. The mountain tribes are also distinguished by their ornate costumes. The men usually dress simply, favoring black trousers, while the girls and women are known for their colorful embroidery and many hand-crafted silver necklaces and bracelets.

Most Lao Sung are animists also continue to practice Chinese ancestor worship and divination. Some believe in *Taoism*, Buddhism and even Christianity, but the influence of early Western missionaries is most evident in the writing systems they developed for Hmong and other minority languages.


CHINA
Mekong River
BURMA
VIETNAM
Xieng Khouang
Vientiane
THAILAND
KAMPUCHEA
Mekong River
Major Ethnic Groups in Laos
Legend
Thai-Lao ▨
Other Thai ▨
Hmong ▨
Lolo ■
Man ■
Lao Theung ▨

ISSUE NO. 73 - 1980 SOUTHEAST ASIA CHRONICLE

FACTS AT A GLANCE: LAO PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC (LPDR)

AREA: 91,400 square miles

POPULATION: 4 million

POPULATION DENSITY: 45 persons per square mile

POPULATION GROWTH RATE: 2.9 percent annually

TALLEST MOUNTAIN: Phu Bia (Xiang Khuang province), 9,242 feet

CAPITAL CITY: Vientiane

WIDEST POINT: 315 miles

LONGEST POINT: 650 miles

ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEM: 16 provinces (khwaeng)
1 municipality
115 districts (muang)
11,512 villages (ban)

MONETARY UNIT: Kip (350 kip = U.S.$1)

Student Activities

A. Comprehension: Fill in the blanks.

Laos is the only 1.______ country in Southeast Asia. Long ago it was known as the Kingdom of Lan Xang, which in English means 2.________. Laos is bordered by the countries of 3.________, 4.________, 5.________,6.________, and 7.________. The longest border is shared with 8.________.

The country is dominated by mountains and rivers, most of which flow into the 9.________, which is the largest river in Southeast Asia. The 10.________mountain chain runs roughly north to south.

Multiple Choice: Choose the correct answer.

1. The most fertile area in Laos is
a) the northwest
b) the northeast
c) the south
d) none of the above

2. The northeast monsoon brings the cool dry season from
a) November through February
b) March through May
c) June through September
d) none of the above

3. The rainiest month in Laos is
a) December
b) August
c) April
d) none of the above

4. The hottest, driest month of the year in Laos is
a) August
b) April
c) February
d) none of the above

5. The coldest temperatures are found in the mountains of the
a) northwest
b) south
c) northeast
d) none of the above

6. Most farmers in Laos plant
a) one rice crop per year
b) one rice crop every two years
c) two rice crops per year
d) three rice crops per year

7. The most important crop in Laos is
a) tea
b) corn
c) upland rice
d) none of the above

8. Laos exports most of its electricity to
a) Myanmar
b) Vietnam
c) Thailand
d) none of the above

9. The average size of a family farm in Laos is
a) .4 acres
b) 4 acres
c) 40 acres
d) 400 acres

10. The population of Laos is approximately
a) four million
b) forty million
c) fourteen million
d) none of the above

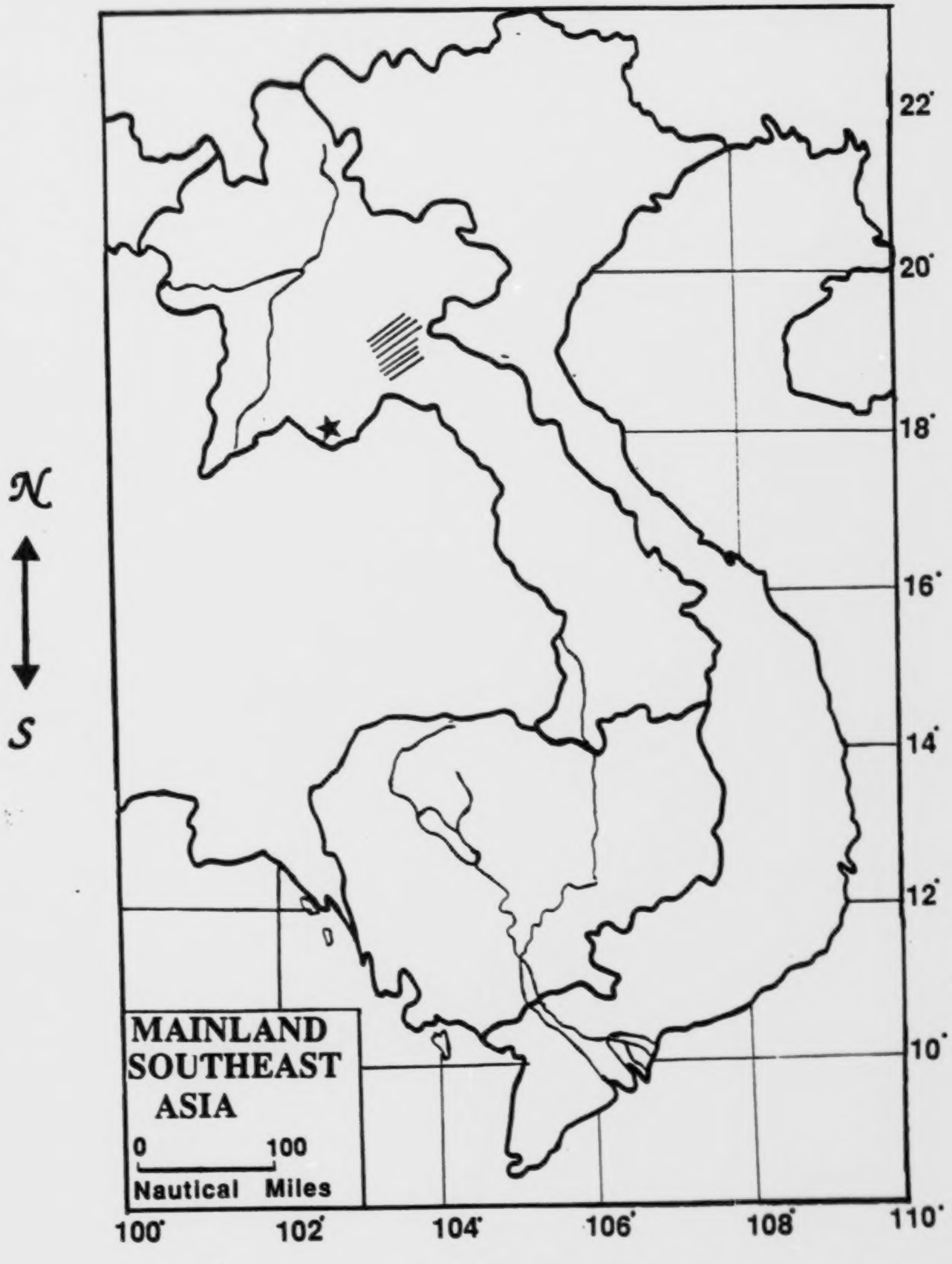
B. Class Discussion: Discuss and then write an essay on how the geography of Laos is different and similar to that of your state. How are the people different and similar?

C. Creative Writing: Write a story or poem to describe what you might experience while walking through a jungle in Laos.

D. Student Follow-up: Identify five questions you would like to ask about the topics in this chapter. With help from the teacher, try to identify reference sources (books or people in your community) that will provide answers to your questions.

E. Map Exercise: On the following map of mainland Southeast Asia, identify

1) Laos and five neighboring countries
2) the gulf of Tonkin and the gulf of Thailand
3) the Annamite (Phu Luang) mountain chain
4) the Bolovens plateau and the Plain of Jars
5) the Mekong river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Society and Culture

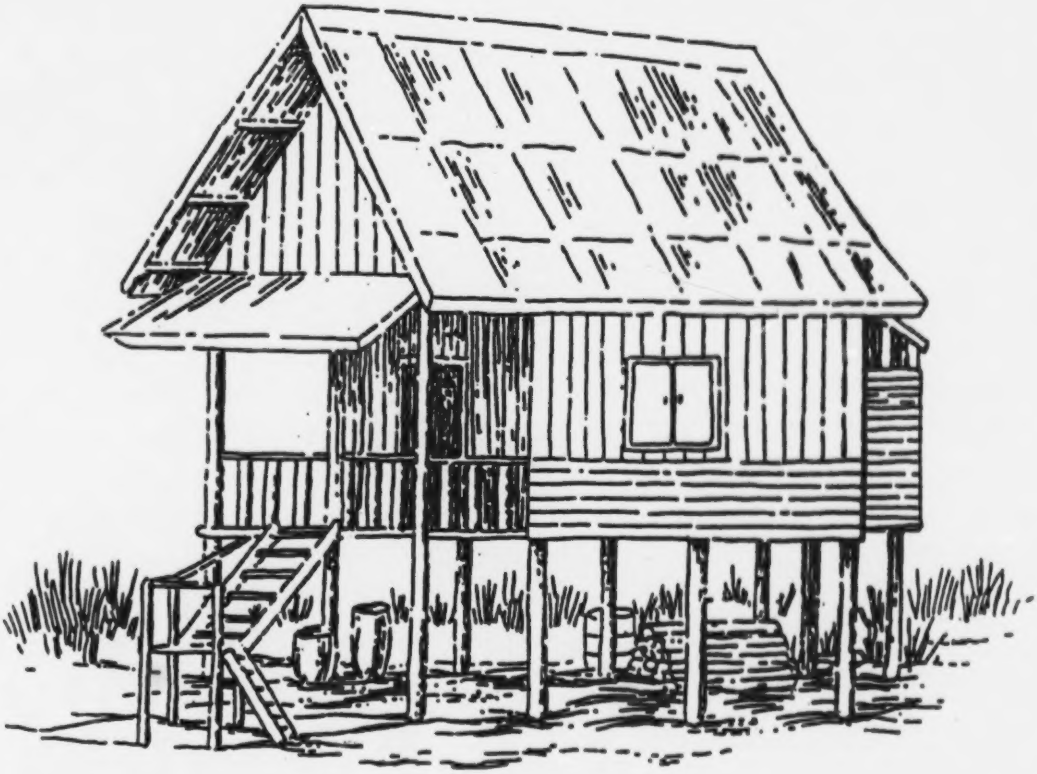
Lowland Laotians

Like the United States, Laos is a land of many different ethnic groups and lifestyles. The government officially recognizes 68 ethnic groups. Yet this number represents just a fraction of the many kinds of people you might meet in Laos. In this chapter, you are invited to resume your imaginary journey through the Land of the Million Elephants and meet Laotian teenagers from different places and ethnic groups. They will tell you about daily life in their communities.

Nang Khampa: Village Girl from Champasak Province

My family are farmers in the Mekong river valley. There are six people living in our house: Father, Mother, Grandmother, my younger brother and sister, Suk and Keo, and me. This is my mother's village. When she and Father married, he came here to live with her parents because she was the youngest daughter. My grandfather died of *malaria* during the Second World War, but Grandmother is healthy and helps with cooking and caring for my baby sister.

We are lucky to have a wooden house built high above the ground with a metal roof so we can stay dry during the rainy season. Poorer people have huts built of bamboo with roofs of grass or leaf. Because of the weather these do not last long and take a lot of time and work to repair. Our house is a very common Lao house. It has two walled rooms for sleeping, but we spend most of our time outside on the porch. This is where we prepare food,



from: The Village of Deep Pond

rest, and visit. Sitting on the porch, we can easily see people passing by on the dusty road; we call to our friends and relatives to climb the wooden ladder up to the porch and come relax with us.

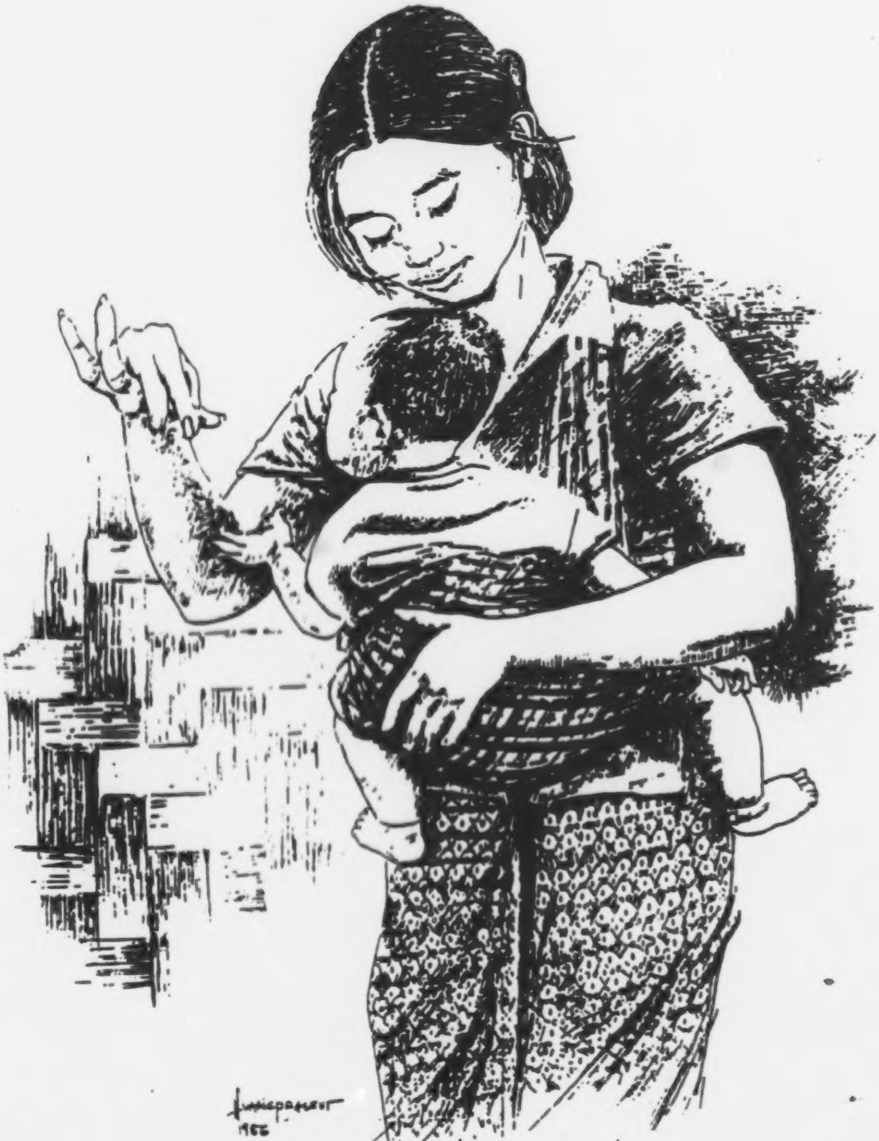
Beneath the house is my mother's loom. We grow cotton and silk so Mother can weave beautiful colored skirts. She uses patterns her mother taught her, and she is now passing them on to me. Although many girls nowadays think it is more fashionable to wear textiles imported from factories in Thailand and Singapore, I think the cloth that my mother makes is much more beautiful. In southern Laos, we weave special patterns called *ikat*. They take much skill to make because we must dye the thread into the proper color patterns before we weave it. I use the dark-colored cotton skirts for everyday wear, but for special occasions, such as going to the temple, I put my hair up in a chignon and dress in my most colorful silk **sinh**, worn tight at the waist with a silver belt that my grandmother gave me.

Usually, however, my life is rather routine. I get up when the rooster first crows in the morning, even before the sun shines, to start the cooking fires and steam the rice for my family's daily meals. We have to soak the rice before steaming it in the woven cones, which look like peaked hats. Once cooked and packed in smaller woven containers, the rice will last all day.

Our rice is unique. Unlike Thai, Cambodians, Vietnamese and other neighboring peoples, we prefer to eat sticky rice. After cooking it, we eat it warm or cold by rolling it in our fingers and then dipping it into different kinds of spicy sauces and hot curries.

At home we eat a lot of sticky rice, fish, and foods found in the woods: fried termites, grubs, and mushrooms that we gather from the forests near our farms. My friends and I love fishing. It is a good excuse to get away from the adults and play in the cool, fresh water. Using fishnets, woven fishtraps, or bamboo poles and line, we catch fish and crabs in the rivers and the ponds near the rice fields.

We use some of the fish to make **pa dek**, which is pungent, fermented fish combined with rice husks and salt. We keep the pa dek in large jars under the house and eat it during the dry season when fish are scarce. Like most Laotians, we don't have piped water or electricity, so I spend a lot of time carrying water, washing clothes by hand and preparing food over a charcoal fire. Lucky people have kerosene lamps to light the dark evenings, but most go to sleep and get up early to make use of the daylight.



Laos – Lao mother and child (4)

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Going to the forest to collect bamboo shoots, edible plants, fungus, and firewood is another kind of adventure. The boys will sometimes go with us to catch small animals like rabbits or birds for the family meal. We don't eat a lot of meat. We have two water buffalo, one cow, two pigs, and ten chickens, but we raise them for work, special feasts and to sell. The cow is used to pull the traditional Lao cart with its big wooden wheels, which is well suited to crossing rugged terrain. We do not drink cow's milk. The water buffalo is most important for working the rice fields -- most Laotians don't have tractors. We grow very fond of the family buffalo, so we rarely eat buffalo meat.

The buffalo aren't the only ones who work hard on our farm. I began primary school at age six and ended my formal studies at age eleven, after I had finished the five years of school that our government requires. Some children in our village leave primary school before completing the required five years because their parents need them to work in the fields or look after their younger brothers and sisters. I consider myself lucky because I have learned to read and write Lao, and I know basic arithmetic and the history of our country.

Now my days are full of hard work. Our daily lives and work routines follow the monsoon seasons. The rice-farming cycle begins when the first monsoon rains fall in May. We plant our vegetables and other crops, such as tobacco, cotton, and *mulberry* bushes in the upland fields known as hai. Then we start work on the lowland fields called **na**. First we use the water buffalo to plow a seedbed and then plant the rice seeds that we saved from the last harvest. While the newly planted seeds germinate and grow into slender green shoots, we plow and harrow the soil of the paddy fields, baked hard by the tropical sun, and repair the dikes and ditches for the paddy's irrigation. The upland fields are watered by rain.

About a month after we plant the seeds, and when there are a few inches of water in the fields, we transplant the shoots. It is hard work, walking through the wet fields and bending over thousands of times to press the young shoots into the muck. By the end of July most of the fields are transplanted, and some people move into little huts beside their fields to guard the young plants. During the day the family keeps busy catching fish from the flooded fields or ponds, repairing tools, weeding, or working in the upland hai.

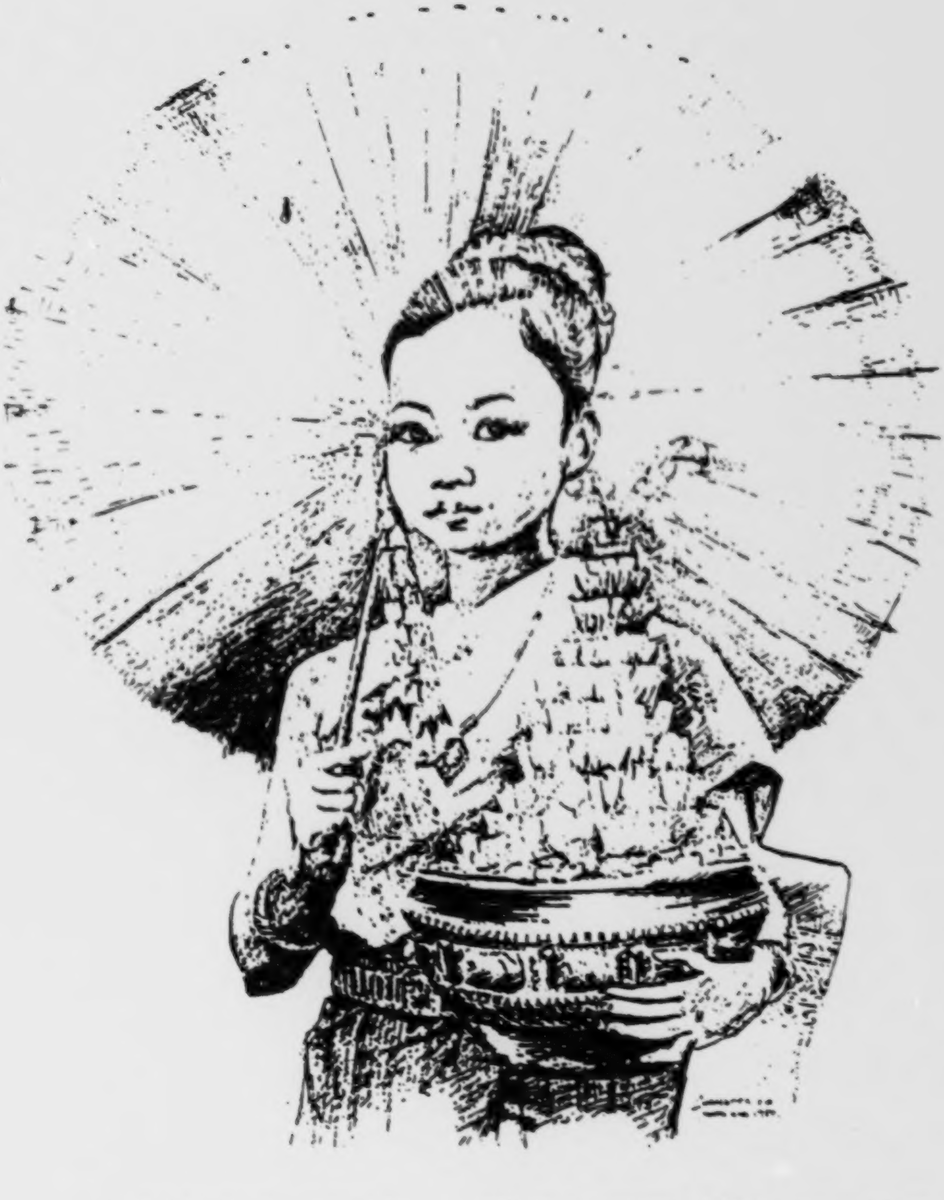
The rice harvest begins in November and is one of the busiest times of the year. After the rice is cut with small sickle knives, it is stacked near the field. We then make a threshing floor by spreading buffalo dung mixed with water over a small area and letting the sun dry it. When the threshing floor is hard, we beat the rice sheaves on it until the grain falls off. The grain is collected in baskets and carried back to the grain storehouse behind our home. Compared with neighboring countries, our agricultural yields are not very high, maybe because we have problems with droughts, floods, and insects. Few people use chemical fertilizers, which are expensive. Mainly we raise enough rice to feed our family, with a little extra during a good year that we may sell or save for a bad year.

Besides rice, we grow vegetables and flowers in the garden near our house. We eat most of the hot peppers, tomatoes, string beans, and cabbage that we grow. However, when the family needs cash, we might grow extra produce to sell in a market town, and collect vegetables or fruits from other farmers to sell with ours along the way.

We use the flowers during the religious festivals and ceremonies that we celebrate throughout the year. We call these parties **bun**, and they are an important part of life in Laos- a place where televisions and radios are luxuries.

My favorite festivals are the Bun Bang Fai ("Rocket Festival") and the Bun Xuang Hua ("Boat-Racing Festival"). We celebrate the Rocket Festival during the sixth lunar month of the Lao calendar, or during May. Each village prepares a decorated bamboo rocket to enter in competitions for the prettiest or the most high-flying rocket. A village's reputation depends on the success of its rocket. People come from all over for dancing, street processions, eating, and drinking while they wait for the ceremonial firing of the rockets. My father told me that this tradition came from *Brahmanism* and ensures the heavy rainfall that is so important to our crops and our survival. I think it is a good excuse for the farmers to have one big party before the hard work of planting rice begins.

The Boat-Racing Festival is held at the end of the rainy season in October or November after the rice harvest. At this time people like to gather in the towns along the Mekong river to sing, dance, and support the long boat



Laos – Little Lao girl on her way to pagoda

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rowing teams from their villages. I once read about the mythical origins of this beloved Laotian sport:

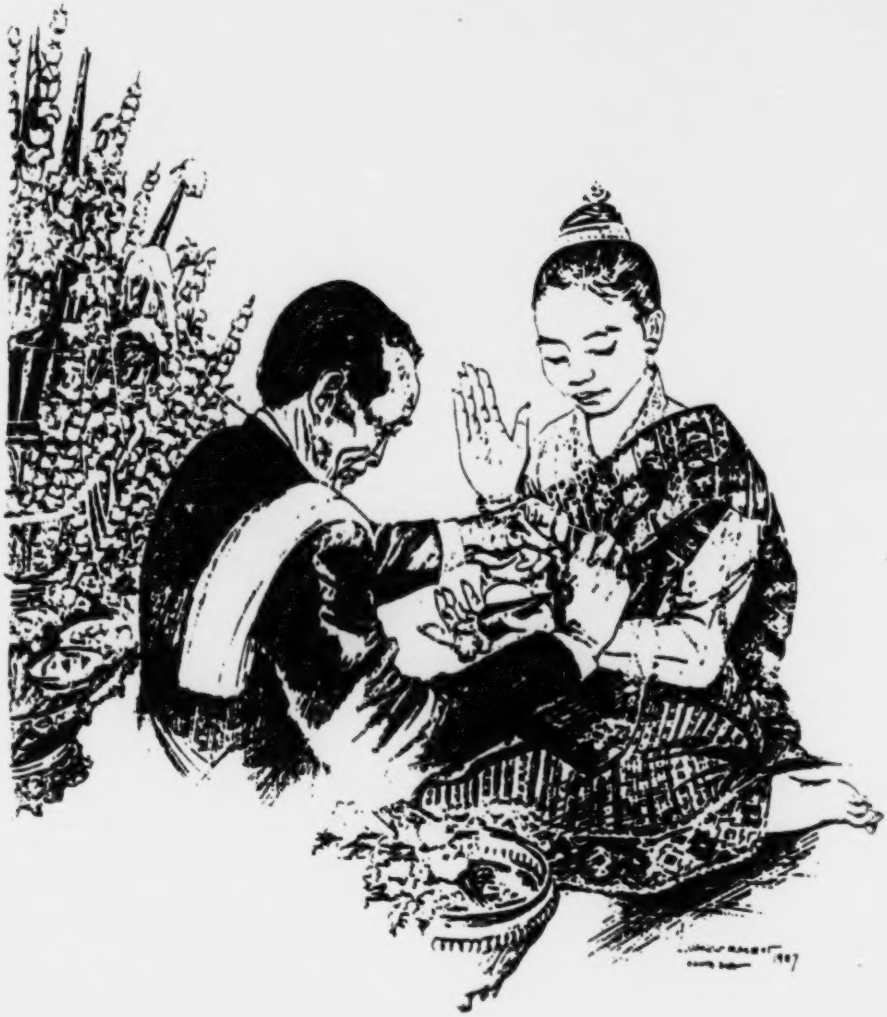
> The tradition of boat racing is connected with the legend about a dishonest king who had tried to take a beautiful woman from her husband through many tricky and unfair competitions. The last game between the king and the desperate man was the boat racing. Fortunately, many dragons came to assist the poor husband in the critical moment. The dragon king, **Naga**, disguised himself as a boat for the oppressed husband. Consequently, the king's boat sank and the king with many of his rowers were drowned. Thus, the story of boat racing is a story of the victory of the simple and humble people over their oppressive masters.

There are two other popular Laotian traditions that I love. The ceremony called ba si or su khwan is performed for newly married couples, pregnant women or mothers and their newborn children, people suffering or recovering from illness, or those going on to new jobs, places or experiences in life.

Su khwan means to call the spiritual essences back to the human body. Lao believe that a person has thirty-two **khwan**, or soul spirits, that correspond to different parts of the body. Khwan may go wandering off now and then, especially if a person is surprised or sad. To enjoy health and happiness, the khwan must be called back with a ceremony shared by friends and relatives.

The centerpiece of the ceremony is a tray decorated with flowers, fruit, raw rice, sweets, boiled eggs, and candles made of beeswax to insure their purity. The tray, which must be very beautiful to attract the soul spirits, has white cotton strings hanging from it.

An older man, often a former Buddhist monk, acts as the master of blessings. He invokes divine angels called **thewada** to witness and help in the calling of the khwan, and then he recites a speech persuading the soul spirits to return. This speech may include words of advice or blessing appropriate to the occasion. The master of blessings is the first person to tie white strings around the wrist of the celebrated guest. Friends and family follow his example, offering blessings of health, happiness, friendship, prosperity, and



Laos – Lao style Baci ceremony

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long life as they tie on the white cotton strings. The strings must be left on the wrist for at least three nights but preferably longer.

The ceremony is important because it encourages and invigorates the guest and is also a way of showing respect and affection for friends, teachers, and elders. Before ending the ceremony, the master of blessings opens a boiled egg. If the egg is well formed, then the ceremony is auspicious. After everyone touches the tray and joins in announcing that the khwan are present and welcomed back from their wandering, we end the ceremony with a feeling that luck and harmony are again with us.

We are also strong Buddhists. My mother and I prepare food for the monks and we regularly go to our village **wat** to listen to the teachings of the Buddha. I try to follow the five Buddhist precepts: not to destroy life, not to steal, not to engage in improper sex, not to tell lies, and not to use intoxicants. My mother tells me that my reputation as a hardworking girl who follows these rules will make me popular and sought after for marriage.

Lao custom allows young people to pick their own husband or wife. Although parents may influence their decision, they will seldom prevent a couple from marrying. We have had plenty of time to get to know the personalities of the boys in our village because we grew up playing and working together. We get acquainted while working in the fields, especially during the rice harvest. Our families share labor: one day everyone comes to our fields and the next day we go to someone else's. Boys and girls sing to each other, exchanging compliments and polite denials depending on how they feel, in a kind of spontaneous poetry. We admire witty singers.

Sometimes we get together to help build a new house for someone living in the neighborhood. In return that family will host a party for the workers with music and delicious food. When we share the work this way, no cash changes hands, but we get more done faster and have fun at the same time.

You will seldom see a boy and girl touch in public, but you can tell who is courting whom because the boy will show up at his favorite girl's house to visit or help with work. Another sign is when a boy wanders along the village roads or paths in the moonlight, playing his **khaen** pipes. When he stops to make music for a long time outside a girl's house, she knows why.

I am sixteen years old already, so it won't be long before I marry and start a family. Getting married in our country involves many traditions. The luckiest month for a wedding ceremony is the sixth month, but the second, fourth and twelfth months are good too. In former days it was unsuitable to plan a wedding for the eighth month because everyone would be working in the fields and later observing the Buddhist fasting period until the eleventh month.

Some girls and boys elope but if a couple wants a respectable wedding, the boy's aunts or mother should visit the girl's family and find out if they approve of the young man. If all goes well, both sides will agree to consult with an astrologer, often a monk, to find out if the couple's birthdays are harmonious and then determine the luckiest date for the wedding ceremony.

On the evening of the formal marriage proposal, the boy's family will send relatives to the girl's home with trays full of flowers, candles, tobacco and *betel* nut. On the wedding day, they will also bring trays of cakes, meat, and fish in a happy, noisy procession through the streets of the village to the home of the fiancee. Later in the day, the young man goes to her house where they listen to the monks pray. A piece of white cotton thread connects the monks, the water, and the bridal couple. After the wedding, the monks are presented with food and alms and they give more blessings in return.

Then the bridegroom and all his attendants carry household goods from his home to that of his new in-laws, where he will live. His group will not be allowed into the bride's home until they have paid "bribes" of alcohol or small amounts of money to the girl's relatives "guarding" the house. Before going up the ladder to the house, the bridegroom must have his feet washed by younger relatives of the bride. Then the couple joins for a su khwan ceremony in which there are two trays stacked high with the usual fruit, flowers, and candles, but maybe even with gold or silver. After the two masters of blessings complete their speeches, all the guests tie cotton strings around the wrists of the newlyweds. The young couple respond with a respectful wai and small gifts.

The newlyweds are finally led to their bedroom, where they are blessed by a virtuous older woman, neither a widow nor a divorcee, who instructs them on how to live together happily. A wedding is one of the most important events in a Laotian girl's life. It is a time when she can feel like a beautiful star. She will spend the rest of her life taking care of her children, husband, and her old parents to whom she owes gratitude for having nurtured her when she was a child.

Thaw Suk: A School Boy in Vientiane

I was born and raised in a village on the outskirts of Laos' capital city, Vientiane. I lived with my family in our village until I finished my five years of **pathom**, or primary school. I was only eleven years old but my teacher could see I paid attention in class, practiced my lessons, and learned quickly, so she recommended I continue with my schooling. My father decided that rather than allow me to continue to play with the other village boys who tend the water buffalo, it was best for me to stay with relatives in Vientiane. This way I could attend a better school and develop a career.

I have already completed my first three-year cycle of secondary studies at the **matanyom**. Now I am fifteen and preparing to enter the second cycle of my education which will allow me to enter the Teacher's Training College at Dong Dok. Because of my love of learning, I would like to be a secondary school teacher and share my knowledge with students.

The competition for government teaching jobs has decreased because salaries are not high, and the cost of living in town seems to be increasing each day because of inflation. Many bright and ambitious young people would rather work as private traders or business people.

Vientiane is busy these days. Many foreigners, such as Thai, Japanese, Australians, and Swedes are coming to offer advice or buy my country's rich natural resources. People tell me that before 1980 the streets were quiet and there were not many businesses. Many government ministries grew their own vegetables behind their office buildings. So much has changed so quickly. I know I am living in an important time for our country.

Now there are many more cars and motorcycles on the roads. When I walk home from classes, I can hear the strange sounds of English, Japanese, French, and Thai from the foreigners who stay at the Lan Xang Hotel and spend their spare time shopping for antiques and Laotian woven fabrics. Many things- soaps, clothes, food, fans, refrigerators, and vehicles- are imported from Thailand, across the river. The morning market, where I sometimes stop to eat noodle soup with my school chums, is full of peasants from other villages selling their fruits, vegetables, livestock, and handicrafts in order to buy imported goods.

All this activity, so many new sights and sounds, makes life exciting for me, but my aunt and uncle grumble that these rapid changes make it hard for them to feed and clothe their children and me. People are also concerned about losing the huge, old trees of our splendid teak forests. we sell the trees to Thailand and other countries that have already cut their own. Most people here take the forests for granted, but I think it would be terrible if we had to suffer the floods and mudslides that killed so many people in southern Thailand.

The citizens of Vientiane are also worried about the effects of foreign influences on Lao culture. My parents told me that after the revolution in 1975, teenagers were forbidden to wear blue jeans or makeup. But such strict rules have been relaxed. Now the government allows nightclubs, but they are required to play mostly Laotian music and not just the trendy Thai or Western pop hits. These places seldom attract people who follow the old Lao traditions, and the Lao government is concerned about the AIDS disease coming into Laos.

There are many ways to have fun in Laos. My favorite festivals are the New Year's Day celebrations, which take place all over the country, and the festival at That Luang. According to the traditional Laotian calendar, the year begins sometime in November or December, but the New Year's Day festival is celebrated in April, the hottest month of the year. The festivities last several days. Often you will see people dancing the traditional **lam vong** to celebrate their happiness. Every Laotian knows this ancient dance, so everyone can and does join in the fun. The dancers make two circles, one inside the other. The girls dance in the outer circle, moving their hands and arched fingers gracefully with the music. Each man dances on the inside of his partner, looking relaxed and sometimes flirting, while the whole group moves together in a slow, gentle orbit. When I watch it, I feel the warmth and unity of our Laotian culture.

On the last day of the old year, we sweep our houses to get rid of bad luck or spirits. On the first day of the new year, everyone goes to the wat to present food to the monks, to rinse the statues of the Buddha with fragrant holy water, and to request blessings of health, wealth and happiness. The rest of the day is spent visiting relatives, close friends, and respected elders. The third day is for parties. Young people sing and dance through the streets, splashing water or colored tapioca on both friends and strangers.

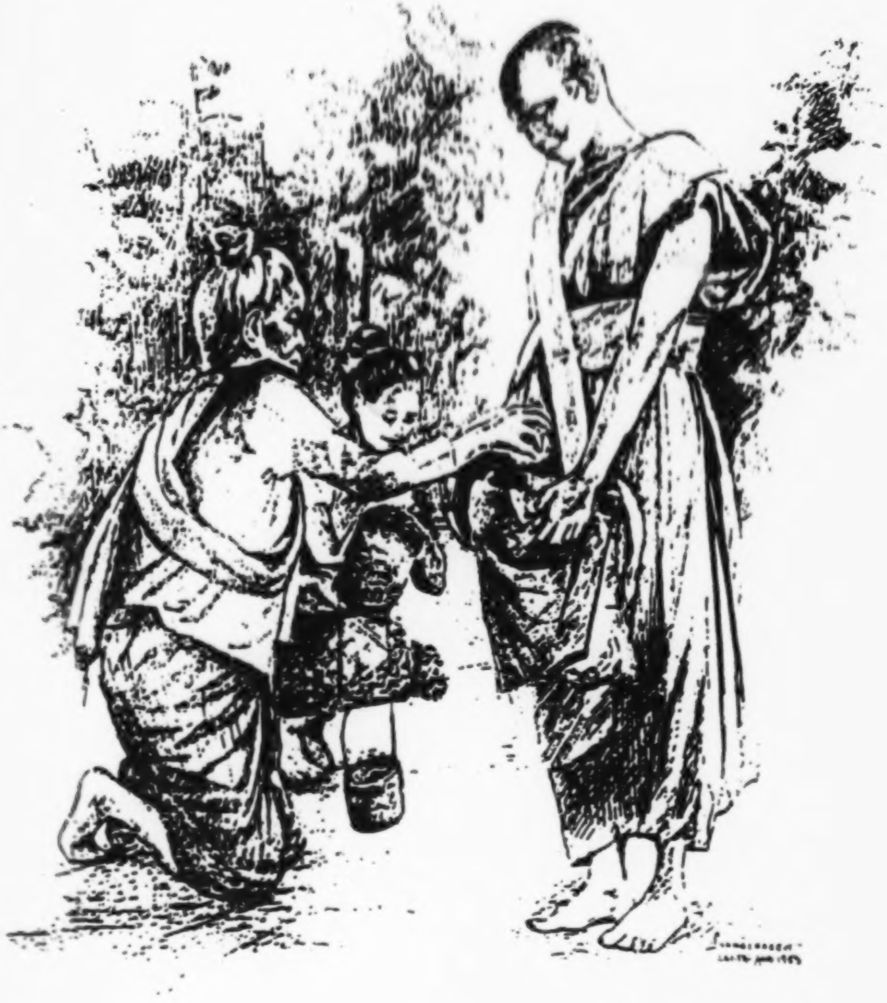
On the final day of the celebrations, people go to the Mekong river, which during the dry season is very low, and build small *stupa* sandcastles on the river's sandbars. Topped with colorful streamers, these structures represent wishes for a life made up of as many brilliant days as there are sand crystals. Some people buy birds and fish, which they set free to earn Buddhist merit.

Buddhism is an important part of our culture even though we are a "socialist country." Most lowland Lao ethnic groups respect the teachings of the Buddha as well as the power of local spirits. Buddhism and spirit worship are two of the most important influences on our lives.

One way to ensure a good life is to keep the spirits or ghosts called phi happy with proper ceremonies. It is hard to explain our belief in phi. There are good spirits, such as the thirty-two that inhabit different parts of the human body and are called back from wandering with the su khwan ceremony. There are also dangerous phi that live all around us and need to be politely recognized and respected with offerings of food, alcohol, candles, and incense. Almost every village has a little house built for the guardian spirits that, if kept satisfied, protect the village.

The villagers also ask for a good crop from the spirits in the rice fields at the beginning of the rainy season. At harvest time the farmer will invite the phi to enter his grain storehouse. There are also phi that guard the household and must be respected regularly in order to keep the home happy and safe. Finally there are some phi, usually the ghosts of people who have died unnatural deaths, who have to be avoided. These frightening spirits may live in the forest or ponds near the village. Sometimes the bad phi will take over a villager, who then acts crazy or gets sick. There are special spirit doctors, often women, who know how to chase out these intruders. Another way to avoid bad spirits is to be a good Buddhist.

The second approach to spiritual life, Buddhism, teaches that it is important to make merit through good deeds and donations to ensure that one is reborn in a better situation in the next life. This is the Buddhist doctrine of *karma*, which teaches that the circumstances of my current life are a consequence of my actions in previous lives. The goal is to extinguish desires and karma which cause us to be reborn, through meditation and merit-making. We can gain merit by helping others (especially the poor),



Laos – Daily alms offerings to Buddhist monks

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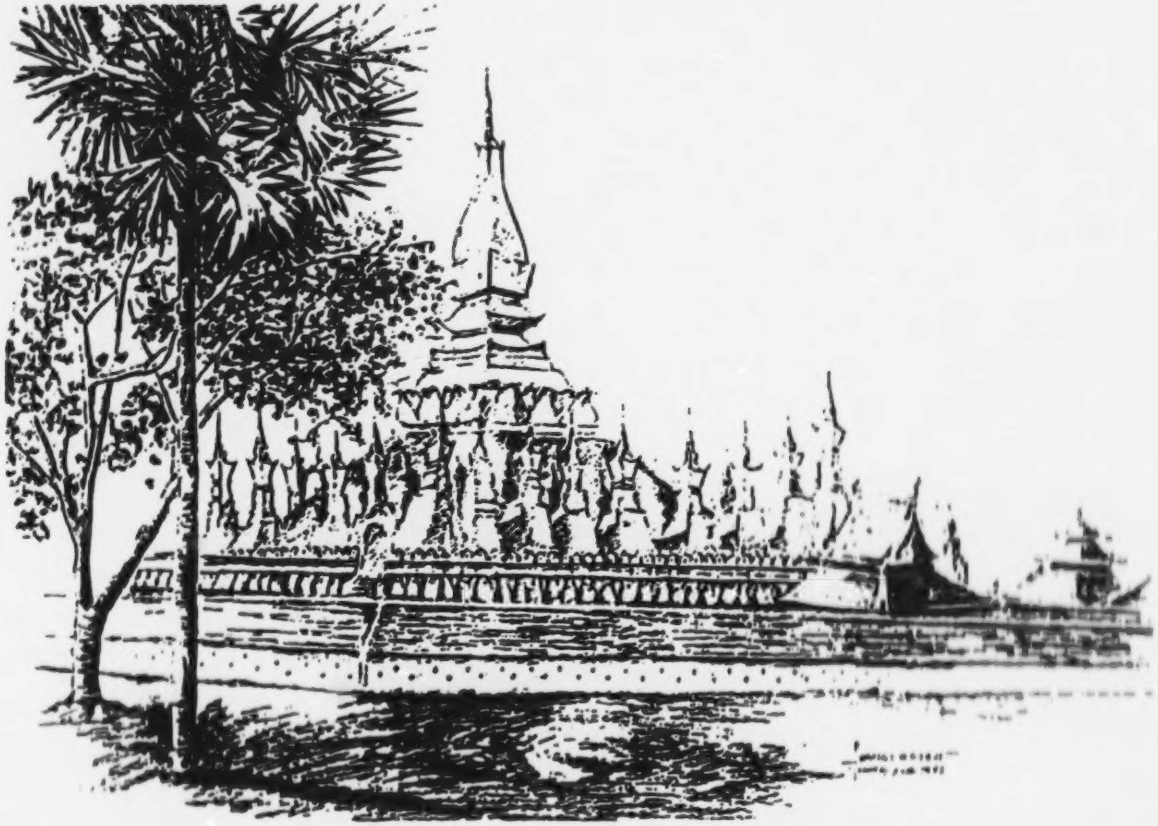
attending sermons at the temple, helping to build or repair the temple, and feeding the monks who live there.

As a male, I have special opportunities to earn merit for myself and for my parents if I become ordained as a yellow-robed Buddhist monk. In the old days most Lao men were expected to become monks for at least a few months so they could learn meditation, *Pali* prayers, good ethics, and practical things such as figuring the lunar calendar and preparing herbal medicines. The wat was where most men learned how to read and write. Not as many men become monks now but some of those who do still work as teachers in isolated villages.

Buddhism has enriched our culture with its language and morality as well as its art and architecture. Our country's most prized possessions are Buddhist sculptures such as the Phra Bang, for which the city of Luang Phrabang is named, and the various Buddhist monasteries and monuments found throughout the country. One of the most famous monuments is the That Luang on the outskirts of Vientiane.

The That Luang stupa, built over another smaller Buddhist monument in 1566, is believed to contain a relic, the hair of the Buddha. A special festival is celebrated at the That Luang each year on the full moon of the twelfth lunar month (November or December), which is also the end of the harvest season. The moonlight shines on the faces of the young men and women dressed in their best clothes as they stroll through the music, folk poetry, and food. The older people are busy catching up on news from friends, drinking or gambling. The next day is occupied with sports, speeches, and more feasting. When dusk falls, the final night of the festival is illuminated with candle-light processions and punctuated with fireworks.

This festival is not just a religious event to venerate the Buddha by showing respect to the slender spires of the That Luang; it is also a civil holiday. My parents have told me that before 1975, the king and queen of Laos would visit the temple known as Wat Ong Tu, where the monarch would receive the oath of loyalty from government officials. Then the royal cortege, followed by loyal Laotian subjects, would proceed to the That Luang. The days of royalty are over, but Laotian people from every province and every ethnic group still gather for the joyous festival.



Laos – Buddhist Thatluang stupa in Vientiane

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Student Activities

A. Comprehension: Choose the correct answer

1. Most rural Lao families have
a) running water and electricity
b) a house built on stilts above the ground
c) a tractor
d) all of the above

2. The diet in rural Laos is mostly
a) meat
b) rice
c) vegetables
d) none of the above

3. The Lao government requires children to go to school for
a) 12 years
b) 10 years
c) 7 years
d) 5 years

4. Su khwan is
a) a Laotian blessing ceremony
b) a type of Lao curry
c) a kind of musical instrument
d) none of the above

5. Buddhism teaches not to
a) destroy life
b) steal
c) tell lies
d) all of the above

6. The Lao New Year is celebrated in
a) January
b) April
c) August
d) December

7. To celebrate New Year's Day, the Lao traditionally
a) clean their homes
b) splash water on friends
c) release fish or caged birds
d) all of the above

8. Laotian Buddhists can make religious merit by
a) feeding the monks
b) becoming a monk
c) helping others
d) all of the above

9. Phi is the Lao word for
a) spirits
b) festival
c) temple
d) dance

10. At a traditional Lao wedding, the bride and groom
a) wear white
b) feed each other cake
c) pour sacred water over the hands of respected guests
d) throw rice

B. Class Discussion:

1. An Old Lao Farmer Describes His Life

> "I've always liked farming, I really enjoy it. During the dry season I fetch water, cut firewood, repair my tools. At the end of the dry season I look up in the sky . . . ho! . . . time to plant my upland rice and vegetables. So, I get out there in my paddy fields to plough them; standing behind my buffalos and pushing them along saying, 'Tsk, tsk . . . hey you, go straight ahead . . . stop turning! Okay, stop now." I work as I like. If I feel tired or the sun is too hot I stop for the day, come back to the house, rest, and get some strength. Then, the next day I go back and soon the ploughing and transplanting is finished. Nothing to do now for a few months but rest up, fetch water, catch fish, and cut wood. Then I go harvest my rice and I'm all set for the next dry season. What I really like best about my life is that I don't have any boss to tell me what to do, I'm free! Young people today, though, are different. They want to get good jobs and make a lot of money. They want to study English so they can talk to you foreigners and travel. They want to live downtown, build nice houses, have cars. They don't like to work as hard as we do, they want an easier life.
>
> I don't blame them. A lot of times I've wished my life was easier than it is. Having to walk so far, work so hard . . . Hwai! It really makes me tired. And never any money. No money to get good medicine when you get sick, no money to buy nice food, not enough money to give to the wat and run religious festivals, no money for the poor farmer who works so hard, but the big people who live downtown have all the money they need and don't do anything for it except sign papers. Even though I enjoy farming, I wish our lives weren't so difficult, we weren't so sick and poor."

These are the words of a real villager from the village of Ban Xa Phang Meuk, "the Village of the Deep Pond," nine kilometers north of Vientiane. This villager was speaking to an American researcher in the late 1960s, but many people in Laos still live the subsistence lifestyle described by this man. Please discuss the following:

a) How is his life different from yours?
b) What are the good and bad aspects of his lifestyle? Of your lifestyle?

c) How do American and Laotian teenagers differ from their parents in their goals in life?
d) Do you think rural people in the United States have similar feelings about city dwellers? Why or why not?
e) Does the Laotian farmer spend his money differently from most Americans? Why do you think so?

2. The teenagers in this chapter are not real people but characters derived from descriptions of real people found in other books and studies.
a) Do you think there is such a thing as a typical Laotian? Or a typical American? Explain why or why not.
b) Write a brief description of your culture in order to explain it to a Laotian. Then trade papers with another student to compare and discuss your observations.

C. Creative Writing: Suppose your family came from Laos and settled in the United States. Write a letter to your cousins in Laos giving impressions of your new life as a Laotian-American. Refer to information given in this chapter.

D. Essay: How has the climate in Laos affected the way people live? How must Laotians adapt when they come to the U.S.?

E. Outreach: Invite Laotians from your community to talk about their homeland, and teach your class how to dance the lam vong.

Society and Culture

Highland Laotians

Aikam: A Lamet Boy from Northern Laos

I am one of the Lamet, a small tribe from the province of Luang Nam Tha, near the entrance of the Mekong river from China. Traditionally our people have preferred to live on the mountain slopes, which is why we are called the Lao Theung, or hillside Laotians. I have been told that we were among the original peoples in Laos, but when the Lao Loum came we moved out of the lowlands to the middle slopes. Our language is different from the Lao language that we learn in school.

We clear fields in the hillside forests and plant them with our crops, mainly sticky mountain rice, hot peppers, cassava, potatoes, cucumbers, and taro. Our ancestors liked to move to new fields every few years, but the government discourages us from practicing slash and burn agriculture now because many other people are also doing it and the forests are disappearing too quickly.

We clear the hill plots in January and burn them in April so that the ashes can fertilize the seeds that we plant in May. The hardest months of the year are during the dry season when we burn the fields. Food becomes scarce. When the time for planting finally comes, we don't hoe or plough the soil like other groups. We use a pointed stick to make holes, and then the women follow behind to drop a few seeds in the hole and stamp some soil over it with their heels. Later we will weed and guard the plots from animals.

We are happy to see the rains return, and with them the wild plants and animals of the forest, which we eat. During the rainy season which begins

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in May, the girls and women of the village go out everyday to the jungles far from the village, gathering roots, greens, and other good food. Some folks collect honey and beeswax to trade with people in the valleys for work tools, such as axes and bush knives, which we use to clear land and farm.

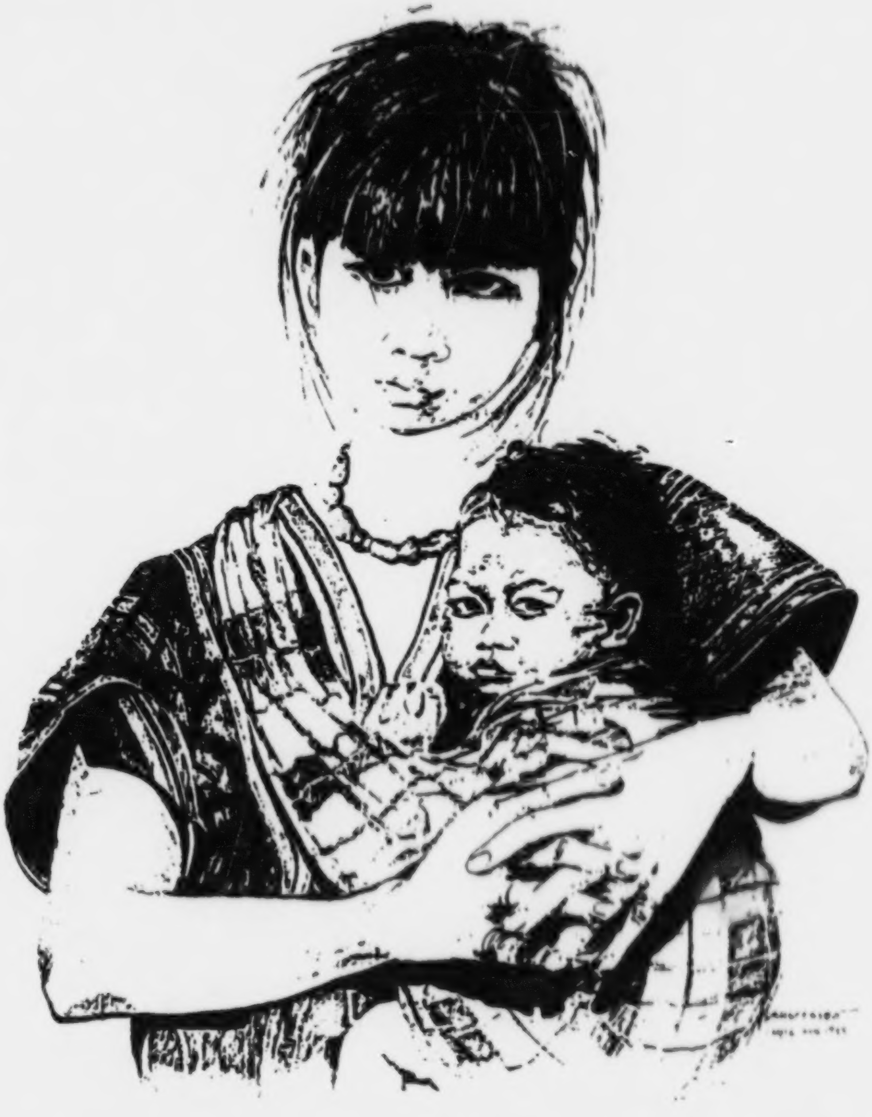
We hold ceremonies at the several shrines around the watch house near the fields before we harvest the rice. There are shrines for the spirit of the field, for the spirit of the rice, and for the village spirit. After making sacrifices, prayers are said. Here is one, asking for prosperity and luck:

> Paddy spirit, rice spirit, please enter the watch house. Give us filled baskets, give us flowing baskets, may there be many pourings, a hundred heaped pourings from the bottom up to the edge of the grain bins, of the rice baskets. Let us have copper coins from Nam Tha, let us have coins from the Mekong. Let us have pleasant sounding bronze drums, have good wives, have big, wide silver ornaments, and buffalo with long horns.

To ensure that we have enough food, boys like me keep busy all year with trapping, snaring, and hunting. We catch wild pigs and deer with traps and guns and use a crossbow to skillfully shoot smaller animals, such as monkeys, squirrels, and birds, for dinner. We give thanks to the spirit of the forest that allows us the catch. Sometimes we cut the meat into strips and dry it or smoke it to preserve it. Slaughtering animals is done only by men.

We also keep tame animals, such as buffalo, cows, pigs, dogs, and chickens, to sacrifice to the spirits on special occasions. The buffalo is seldom used for work. It is a sign of wealth and important in ceremonies that honor the spirits of our ancestors. A man who has bronze drums or many buffalo is respected and he must invite all the village when he sacrifices a buffalo and distributes the meat. The buffalo skull is put on a pole and displayed in the ancestor shrine.

A shaman must perform sacrifices regularly to the village spirit. He contacts this spirit about village matters. It is important to satisfy the village spirit because villagers may otherwise become ill or suffer disaster. We believe that spirits are often the cause of illness. Medicine men try to cure the sick by performing the proper sacrifices and rituals. Like other ethnic groups in Laos, we enjoy performing ba si su khwan ceremonies to strengthen the spiritual essences of people.



Laos – Lao mother and child (2)

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We live in houses built on poles. The roofs extend almost to the ground, and underneath the house there is plenty of room for stacks of dry firewood. Sometimes there is tobacco drying in flat baskets on the thatch roofs. The oldest man in the household usually represents the extended family at village meetings.

Each village has a communal house that is built on the ground, usually in the center of the village. The village drum, made of animal skin stretched over a hollowed tree trunk and decorated with carved lizards, is kept in the communal house. It is used to send signals announcing the arrival of guests to villagers working in the forests and fields, for example. When guests come, the village elders come together to drink rice wine out of a common jar with straws, and a feast is prepared. The guests, perhaps tired and sore from a journey through the mountains, may have their legs massaged by singing village girls. Both guests and unmarried boys sleep in the communal house. We believe that the village spirit rests in the earth beneath the communal house, so it is a sacred place.

Tok: A Kammu Girl from Luang Phrabang Province

We are neighbors, maybe even cousins, of the Lamet people. We both belong to the Lao Theung group, the original people of Laos. Although we have no written language, we have kept our history and culture alive by telling stories. A Laotian proverb warns: "Food not eaten will become rotten, old things not told will be forgotten." One of the stories tells how the Kammu people founded the city of Luang Phrabang. It goes like this:

> Old people tell us that long, long ago people wanted to build the city of Luang Phrabang. But at that place there was a huge tree which nobody was able to cut down. When men tried to cut the tree, they got sick and fled. Then a man named Wang came one day and said, "If you promise to remember the day of my death forever, I will cut the tree." The people answered: "Yes, we will promise but we would prefer you to do it without dying." So Wang went ahead and cut the tree. When it tumbled down, he dropped dead. After they buried him, the people built Luang Phrabang. When the city was finished, they looked for a man to be king. They all went to a high cliff at the place where the Ou river flows into the Mekong. They decided that whoever was brave enough to jump from

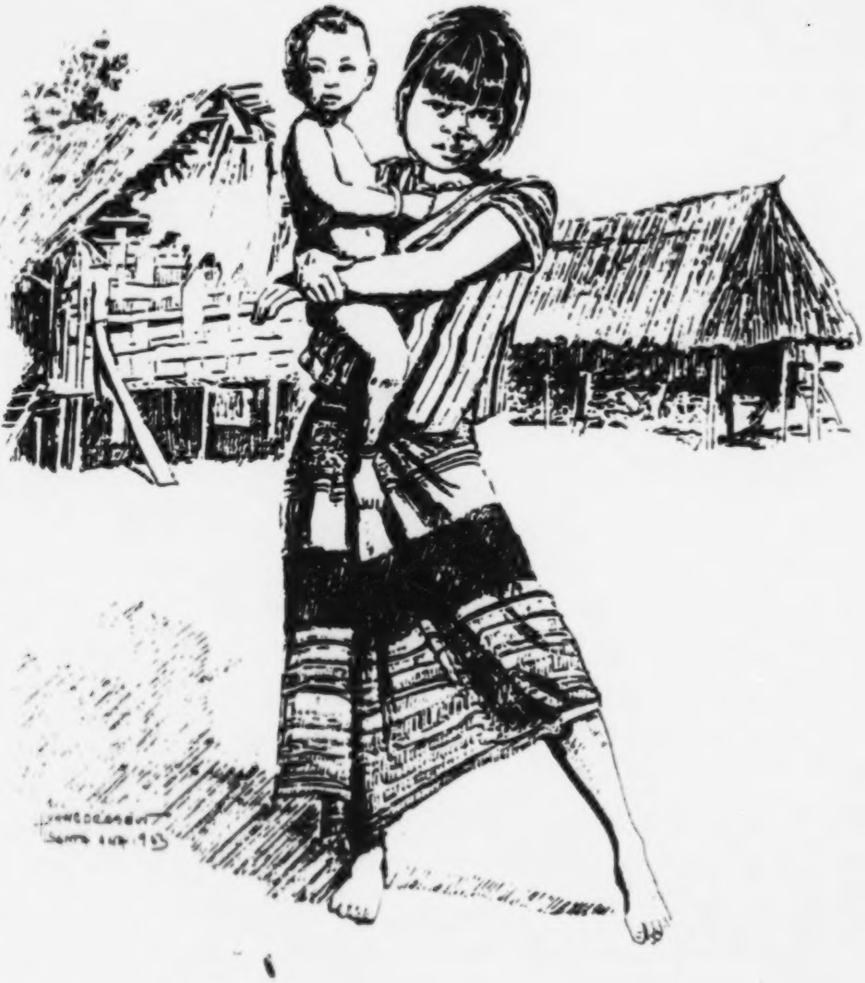
> that cliff should be king. They told the men who wanted to be king to climb up and jump while they waited in boats and rafts on the water below. However, each brave man lost his courage when he looked down from the top. Each ran away, except for one man who was from the same family as Wang. Before he climbed up, he had tucked his quiver into his belt, and when he stood at the top to look down, his quiver thrust against something behind him, and he fell by accident into the river below. Everyone praised his courage and he was made king. Old people say he was a Kammu.

My village is located on a ridge and surrounded by a fence with several openings. One of the entrances has a gate decorated with swords carved from wood to keep hostile spirits out. Another opening, which never has a gate, leads to the cemetery. We keep this open because the ancestors' spirits are helpful and protective and we don't want to scare or offend them by breaking the proper Kammu customs. Unlike many other Laotians, we do not cremate our dead. We bury the people from each totem group in one place.

Inside the village each household has several buildings. There is a big house, where several generations of the family live together. There is also a house where the teenage boys sleep and strangers are entertained. We build our barns outside the village fence so our food will not burn up if there is a fire in the village. We depend on a stream outside the village for water.

Elders are very important to the Kammu. Because we do not have a written language, it is the job of old men to discuss and keep agreements, make peace between families if there are disputes, and decide fines. The old men are our legal system in the village. They also make decisions about how the village should farm and other kinds of work that involve the community.

We grow mountain rice in order to live and eat. We eat the white sticky rice three times a day. We also grow a bluish-black rice that is used for traditional meals, such as after a good harvest or when a new house is built. Because the black rice represents safety, Kammu travellers often carry some with them. Usually, men travel to towns to trade. They sell betel, woven baskets, fermented tea, cotton or fabric to buy salt, clothes, and pots. The



Laos – Saravan Kha mother and child

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young unmarried men also like to travel and earn money before they marry. Many Kammu used to go to northern Thailand to work as loggers in the teak forests.

For those who remain home, there is plenty of work. We raise water buffalo, cows, horses, goats, pigs, and chickens. Besides rice, we grow tobacco, corn, tea, vegetables, bananas, mangoes, and other fruits. Early every morning the men and boys take the cattle to lick salt and then go to check their traps in the forest. Mainly they catch birds and rodents. Only boys and men hunt and trap; girls and women fish in the mountain streams and collect bamboo shoots and other food from the forest. People avoid going into the jungle alone.

The girls and women begin their day by cooking the sticky rice that has soaked overnight. Then they carry water and husk rice by pounding it. After breakfast during the growing season, those strong enough go to work in the fields. Old people stay home to feed animals, cook, sharpen knives, and take care of the little children. If it is not yet the farming season, villagers can enjoy the cool morning hours. The women chat and knit net bags; the men meet in a common house to make traps, weave baskets, and tell stories.

Later the girls and women must take care of their other chores such as gathering firewood and preparing wine, tobacco, and fermented tea in case guests arrive. The old people act as hosts when visitors come. Lunch is usually rice, peppers, and salt, which people carry wrapped in a banana leaf to wherever they are working. Before we eat in the field, we must share the food with the spirits of the land to whom the soil belongs and offer prayers.

> We put this for you,
> who stay in the forest and on the ground
> in the fields and at the falling-traps,
> who watch the boundaries and the abuttals,
> come and eat some rice and some salt.
> Let this field of ours get rice in abundance
> and be free of grass too,
> Be fertile by rain and burnt by the fire.
> If evil war comes, may it go away to the north,
> and if evil tigers come, may they go away to the south.
> If wild boars enter, may their bones break,
> if kites enter, may their wings break.

There are many rituals important to farming. At every stage of our work in the fields, there are special stories, rites, and music. We never make music in the fields just to entertain ourselves. It is always to show respect and request blessings and abundance from the spirits. Otherwise the crop may not grow, or the harvest could be damaged by disaster.

We eat dinner together after sunset, when everyone is refreshed after a bath in the stream. Our time is measured according to agriculture. From mid-January through March we clear the fields, which we burn in April and May. Then we sow and weed from July to October, when we harvest. In the cool month of December we rest. Our routine life is rarely disturbed except by festivals and feasts. Sometimes a water buffalo is sacrificed to cure a sick person or to honor a dead villager.

Sarn: A Mien Boy in the Mountains of Phong Saly

To reach my mountain village, you must walk for many hours and for many miles from the road. After taking a path through the forest, you will come to a small bamboo pole bridge over a stream, which is about nine feet wide. Once across the bridge, you climb a steep slope- but don't worry, there are plenty of little shacks and caves where you may seek shelter along the way if it begins to rain or if you need to rest on this long journey. After you cross this mountain ridge, you will descend into a small natural basin surrounded by sharp limestone peaks. The cluster of simple wooden houses with thatch roofs is my village.

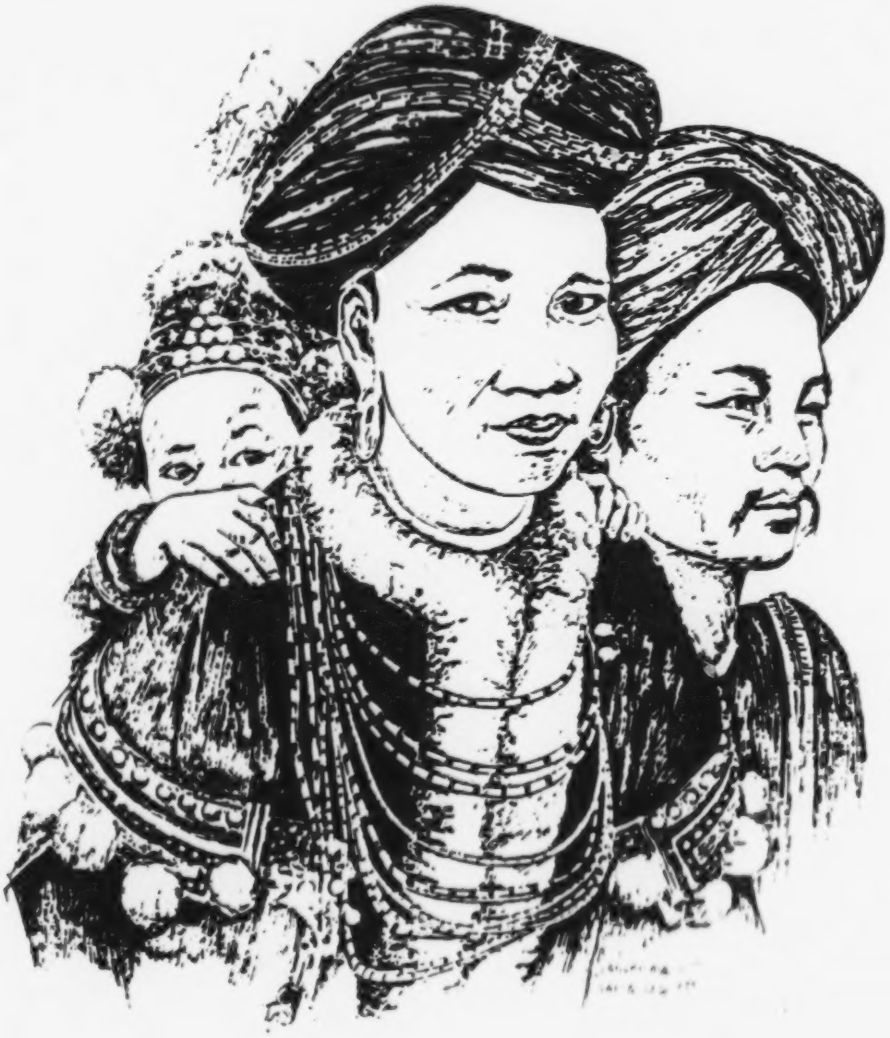
You notice there are no boundary fences, although you did pass a customary bamboo gate. There are six houses built directly on the ground, in addition to rice granaries, pig pens, a horse stable, and chicken coops. Our houses have earth floors with a fire hearth in the center. In the mountains it can get cold enough to freeze water. During the rainy season our water comes from a nearby creek, but in the dry season the girls must carry water in bamboo tubes from a larger stream farther away. In the wet season we use bamboo pipes as gutters to direct the rainwater to a well.

Inside the house there are pallets built against two walls. One side is for guests, the other for family. In a corner of the house, there is a simple cooking stove. On another wall there is an altar. You may be surprised to see Chinese characters written on papers stuck on the wall near the altar. The Mien people originally came from China and we have proudly kept some of Chinese traditions. For example, we believe in Taoism and it is important for a father to teach his sons to read and write some Chinese so they can participate in religious ceremonies and pay respect to the ancestors. We make paper by boiling bamboo shoots and then pounding them into pulp. We prefer regular rice to the sticky rice of the Lao Loum and are less fond of spicy foods.

We raise the food we eat. Near the village we have cleared some fields for growing corn, sweet potatoes, bananas, sugar cane and dry rice. On more distant mountain slopes, some hours walk from the village, we have cut fields for dry rice and poppies. Our village is small, but these days it is hard to find enough new land to continue the practice of clearing new fields and abandoning old ones. The government wants us to resettle in the lowland areas where rice is easier to grow, yields are higher, and it is easier to go to school or the health clinic if someone is sick or hurt. But we like to live high in the mountains, minding our own business and living life in our traditional way. In the lowlands there is more malaria and we would be discouraged from growing opium, which our old people eat and smoke in the afternoons.

We grow corn, which I feed to our chickens, cows, pigs, and horse. We sell some of the cattle to the Lao Loum and eat the pigs and chickens. The new government tells us that men and women are equal, but it is our custom that the men eat first and the women eat after the men are done. Women cook and girls serve. We use chopsticks, unlike the other ethnic groups who use spoons or their fingers. My favorite meal is rice with sweet rice alcohol poured over it, roasted pork, raw cabbage, and soup with bamboo shoots and pork fat. After the meal we like to drink tea which we grow ourselves.

Our women are very skilled at needlework, and their unique clothes display their handiwork. As soon as she is old enough to hold the needle, a little girl will learn cross-stitch embroidery. When a Mien boy wants a wife, he will look for a girl who sews with care and beauty because such girl is capable of hard work. After finishing their morning chores of husking rice and carrying water, girls sit together on stools for hours to embroider the trousers they all wear. They also wear black cotton shirts that have their necklines decorated with red yarn ruff and indigo turbans made attractive with embroidery. Traditionally a woman arranged her turban so none of her hair showed. To show one's hair ws rude and a sign of sloppiness. Heavy



Laos - Iu-Mien family

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silver necklaces and earrings are popular for special occasions like the Mien New Year, which we celebrate at the time of the traditional Chinese New Year, in January or February.

During New Year's we kill a big pig and plenty of chickens and prepare food and alcohol to welcome musicians and singers. We have lutes, flutes, gongs, and cymbals but seldom use them except during New Year's celebrations, weddings, or when making offerings to the guardian gods. Young people like to sing romantic songs to each other. If a boy wants to spend the night with a girl, he will sing poems to her asking her to meet him. If she likes him, she will sleep with him.

If the couple sincerely like each other, their parents may plan a marriage, or they may choose another spouse for their child. Fathers have the power to arrange formal marriages. A go-between arranges the formal proposal and the boy must give money or silver to the girl's parents. Then an auspicious date for the wedding must be set by the village shaman. Sometimes this process takes months, and the girl may have already had a child with her fiance before the wedding takes place. The ceremony may last three days and three nights- a long time for the girl who must wear the heavy fabric canopy on her head, which makes it almost impossible for her to sleep. Mostly we prefer to marry other Mien, but I have heard that some Mien who have settled in the lowlands now marry Lao Loum and other minority groups. Everything is changing very quickly. I hope we don't lose our culture.

Ly Yang: A Hmong Girl in Xiang Khuang Province

Once my ancestors lived and farmed in the high mountains, descending only to trade livestock, opium, and silver. Now my family lives in the lowlands. During the war in Laos it was too dangerous to continue living in the mountains because of fighting and bombs, so my family fled and went to stay near Vientiane.

I was born in 1976. This was a time of chaos for the Hmong; some of my relatives crossed the Mekong river into Thailand and later went to America. Others went to the new Lao government's **seminaa** camps and were never heard from again. The survivors in my father's family returned to the Plain of Jars in Xiang Khuang province. My mother carried me, a weak little baby, on her back.

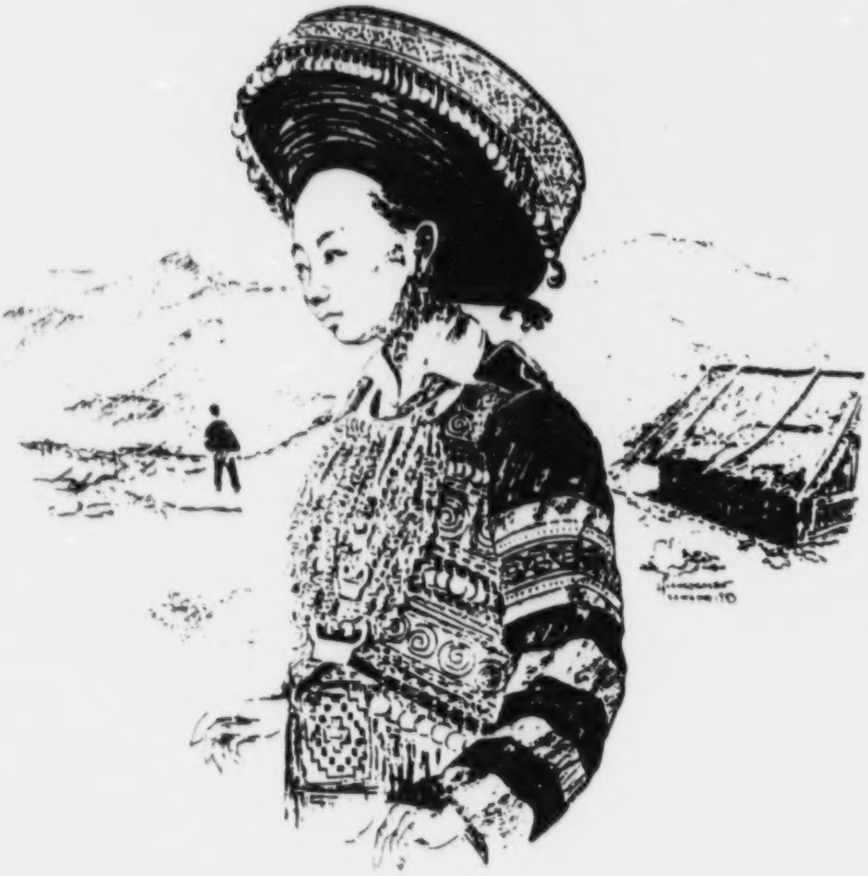
My family has worked hard to make a new life and keep as many of our Hmong customs as we can. We cannot grow opium poppies in the lowlands, although this plant was an important part of our income. My great-grandparents used opium as medicine and as you would use money to buy salt and things that they needed. Most of the cattle and horses raised so skillfully by the Hmong were killed during the war. It has taken time for the Hmong who came back to Xiang Khuang to breed new herds.

Worst of all, there are many small American bombs left from the war that continue to kill family members and friends. Traditionally we use short hoes to prepare the fields for planting. If someone swings a hoe down into the dirt and strikes a "*bombie*," it explodes and shoots many small sharp pellets into her face and body. Some people are blinded and others die, often bleeding to death before they reach the nearest hospital.

There are two ways to avoid this tragedy. One is to use the shovels that the American Quaker organization gives us to cultivate the fields scattered with "bombies." Another way is to have more medicine and clinics and trained doctors and nurses to help the injured. I am studying at the matanyom school now and want to continue with my education so I can become a nurse or doctor and help my people.

Whether I leave my community to go away to school will depend on the decision of the oldest man in my big family. That is the Hmong way. Traditionally we lived in large families with as many as 35 people. The wife and children were obedient to the husband, and the sons to their fathers and older brothers, unless they moved away and set up in a different village. A girl obeyed her parents until she married and then she became a member of her husband's family. If her husband died, she remained in his family unless she was asked to marry her husband's younger brother or someone else.

It is a rule that girls and boys from the same clan cannot marry, but there are at least twenty-three different Hmong clans in Laos so there are plenty of boys to choose from. I can tell a person's clan by their last name, which is the same as their father's. Hmong clans are named after ancestors: Cheng, Chue, Fang, Hang, Heu, Khang, Kong, Kue, Lo or Lau, Ly, Moua, Phang, Phoua, Tang, Tchang, Tchou, Thao, Txu, Vu, Xe, Xiong, Vang, and Yang.



Laos – Samneua Hmong girl

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Girls and boys from different clans meet during our New Year's celebrations, at the same time as Chinese New Year's festivities. Throughout the year, after doing their usual work of planting, harvesting and husking rice, cooking, carrying water, and grinding corn for the livestock, unwed girls embroider or print skirts for the New Year's festival.

Hmong groups are recognized by the colors in their costumes. The Green or Blue Hmong are known by their indigo skirts decorated with *batik* patterns, fine pleats, and embroidery. They also wear turbans, waist sashes, and fine silver necklaces. I am a Green Hmong so my mother is teaching me how to grow hemp, prepare its fiber, and spin and weave it into skirt cloth. I will decorate it with fine patterns using beeswax batik and then dye it in indigo. I will finish the skirt with cross-stitch embroidery.

In the Sam Neua and Hua Phan provinces, there are other Hmong called the Striped Hmong. The girls wear cloth wrapped around their heads in the shape of a large wheel, and shirts decorated with coins, applique spirals, and striped sleeves. The White Hmong wear black Chinese-style trousers, a prune or red-colored turban, and a dark shirt with a fancy collar and an apron decorated with cross-stitches and spirals.

The New Year's festival is the best time to show off embroidered finery and silver jewelry to boys from other clans. Our village will invite other Hmong to visit. There will be bull fights, soccer, volleyball, and most importantly a courting game. Boys and girls stand in two lines facing each other and throw balls to the ones they favor and would like to meet. The youth sing love songs to the opposite sex, and older men play the khaen pipes and dance on one foot in the middle of a circle of onlookers. Later everyone joins in feasting. On another day during the holidays the village we host will invite us to their home for the same fun.

New Year's, weddings, births and deaths are the most important events. The rest of our time is spent trying to make a living. According to Hmong folklore, people did not always work so hard to eat. Long ago the crops journeyed to the granaries and storehouses by themselves. The story goes like this:

> Long ago all plants as well as animals could talk. One day a Hmong farmer went to clear a field for planting rice and corn. As he cut and burned, the bamboo and trees cried and sobbed. But the farmer ignored them and

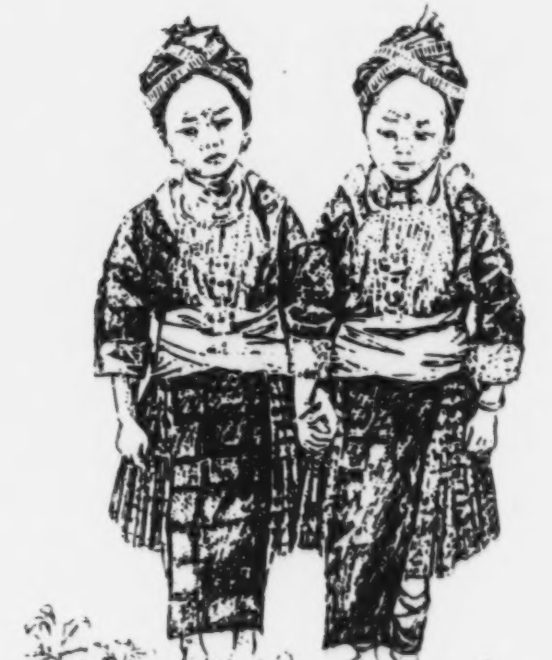
> planted the crops. After he went away, the rice and corn sprouted. When the little plants were as big as the curved feathers in a rooster's tail, all the wild plants and weeds began to grow again too. Soon the bamboo and trees were hitting the rice and corn, and breaking them. When the farmer returned to the field, the rice and corn pleaded with him to protect them. So the farmer chopped down the brush and weeds with his big knife while they wailed and moaned. He cut down all the weeds in the field. The rice and corn were able to grow. In gratitude for being able to grow, the rice and corn told the farmer that because he had helped them he could now stay home. All he had to do was to build a granary for them to live in and when harvest time came they would go to the granary on their own.
>
> The farmer went home and went straight to bed. He did nothing but stay in bed for so long that his ear got flat and stuck to his head. When the crops were ripe, they all came at once, like a stream of water, but there was no place ready for them. The farmer had been too lazy to build a granary! Would they stay outside, to get wet and rot? No, they told the farmer, they would return to the field. If he got hungry, he would have to go and get them because they would not come to him again. That is why Hmong farmers have to go out and carry their harvests home on their backs. All because of this.

Hmong men are known for their skill in metalworking; they make silver jewelry in bird and fish designs and farm tools from scrap metal. The young men work in the fields, feed the livestock, collect firewood for the family, and look for opportunities to make money to pay for their weddings. Girls spend many hours preparing the embroidered skirts they must have ready before they marry.

To arrange a marriage the boy's father asks a go-between to approach the girl's family and have them agree on a bride price which the boy must pay to the girl's parents. Then his family prepares a feast for the girl's family. Later her family will match the hospitality with another feast. Afterwards she will join his family for the rest of her life and receive no inheritance from her own family. The young couple may also elope. If this happens, the boy's father will send two experienced Hmong messengers to inform the girl's parents of the elopement, and then they will discuss the bride price and arrange a wedding date.

The bride is expected to produce many babies, especially sons, who will help their parents and continue the husband's family line. If a woman can't have children, her husband may take another wife. A husband is often present at his child's birth and helps by cutting the baby's umbilical cord.

A Hmong elder can die happily if he or she has seen many grandchildren and great-grandchildren grow up with the Hmong traditions that we have preserved since the Hmong left China. While a Hmong girl's parents are still alive, she will make a traditional costume for each of them, to be kept for their funerals. When the daughter dies, she will be dressed in a skirt given to her by her beloved mother, so that after death they will recognize each other and be reunited.



Laos ~ Little Hmong girls from Xiengkhouang ©Heinke Luangprasert 1987 [illegible]

Student Activities

A. Comprehension: Choose the correct answer.

1. The original inhabitants of Laos were
a) Lao Loum
b) Lao Theung
c) Lao Sung
d) all of the above

2. Laotian slash and burn farmers burn the fields in order to
a) fertilize the fields
b) kill insect pests
c) avoid weeding
d) none of the above

3. Teenage boys of the Lamet tribe
a) hunt with crossbows
b) help slaughter animals
c) sleep in a communal house
d) all of the above

4. To ensure a good crop, the Kammu people
a) buy commercial fertilizer and put it on the fields
b) perform special music, prayers, and rituals
c) use a tractor to plow the land
d) use hybrid seeds

5. Kammu elders make decisions concerning
a) legal fines
b) village farming and community work
c) conflicts between village families
d) all of the above

6. Most Mien people in Laos get their water from
a) taps
b) water tanks
c) bamboo tubes or pipes
d) bottles

7. In Laos, most Mien are
a) Christians
b) Taoists
c) Buddhists
d) Moslems

8. Before a Mien boy can marry a girl, he must:
a) send a go-between to her family to propose
b) pay a bride price
c) let the village shaman pick a lucky date
d) all of the above

9. The Hmong traditionally live in families of
a) as many as 35 people
b) 4 people
c) a dozen people
d) 50 people

10. Hmong women are famous for their

a) cooking
b) weaving
c) fine needlework and batik
d) metalworking

B. Class Discussion

1. How would your life be different if your whole family lived together in one house and you knew you would always live together? Would this influence how you choose a spouse? Do you think it makes a marriage more easy or more difficult? Explain why.

2. Compare and contrast how Laotian traditions of hospitality are similar to and/or different from American culture. How do you welcome guests to your home?

3. How are Laotian spiritual beliefs and practices similar to or different from your own?

C. Creative Writing: Describe a day in your life if you lived without electricity.

D. Debate Topic: A current issue in Laos is the conflict between the traditional practises, such as slash and burn agriculture, of some minority groups and the problem of environmental degradation. Divide the class into groups of four and have one pair take the national government's position to debate the second pair, who represent a mountain minority group. Try to discover solutions to the conflict. If you need ideas, ask the teacher to provide some examples of conflict and resolution between groups in American society.

E. Essay: How does the environment in Laos influence the way people live there? How will environmental changes, such as deforestation, affect Laotians? How might they affect you?

Early History

Laos has a long history. In this chapter you will read of its mysteries, miracles, wars and heroic kings. There are gaps in early Laotian history- books of the early Lao kingdoms were burned and destroyed during invasions by the armies of neighboring countries. To understand Laotian history, we turn to the myths and legends still being told to young Laotians today. Although it is hard to prove the facts presented in these stories, you can get an idea of the values and experiences of ancient Laotians.

Prehistory

Not much is known about the original peoples of Laos. There are some prehistoric sites, such as the outskirts of Luang Phrabang, the caves in Khammouan province, and the Plain of Jars in Xiang Khuang. It is believed that Laos' original inhabitants were Mon-Khmer peoples, the ancestors of the Lao Theung who retreated into the hills as migrations of newcomers, probably Lao Loum, took over lowland territories.

The origins of the Lao Loum and the date of their arrival in Laos is also a mystery. Some scholars think that T'ai peoples migrated from the provinces of Szechwan and later Yunnan in southern China, to escape the taxes and rule of the Chinese emperors. Others believe that the Lao originated in the valley of Dien Bien Phu in northern Vietnam.

A Lao creation myth tells of three chieftains who escaped a terrible flood by building a floating house. After appealing to a heavenly ruler, the chieftains were allowed to go to the "Lower Land," where they settled. With the help of a buffalo given to them by the heavenly ruler, they plowed rice fields until the buffalo died three years later. From the nostrils of the dead buffalo grew a creeping plant that produced three enormous gourds. After a sound was heard from the ripe gourds, one of the chiefs punctured them with a red hot iron. Crowds of people came out of the holes, so the chieftain cut more holes with a chisel.

The people from the gourd became the population of Laos. Those passing through the hole made with the hot iron had darker skin and were known as Lao Theung. The lighter-skinned people who came out of the chiseled hole were the Lao Loum.

Myth and history blur in the tale of Khun Borom. According to legend, Khun Borom descended from heaven riding on an elephant with his wives and retainers, who carried useful tools such as axes and spades. According to a Lao historian, Khun Borom was a real person, a valiant king and excellent warrior, who was enthroned in A.D. 729

Khun Borom's son, known as Khun Lo, was a powerful warrior who conquered Chinese territories, including thirty-two cities and the province of Hunnan. When the Chinese tried to regain the territory, Khun Lo's troops successfully resisted. After establishing an alliance with the king of Tibet to fight off Chinese invaders, Khun Lo turned his gaze south to the army of Khun Chuang.

French historians claim that the *Khmer empire*, the ancestors of today's Cambodians, ranged up the Mekong river to Vientiane at the end of the twelfth century. Vientiane was conquered by the Siamese, today known as the people of Thaïland, from Sukhothai in the late thirteenth century. According to Lao sources, however, a Mon-Khmer chief named Khun Chuang controlled the area from Chiang Saen (in northern Thailand) to what is now Xiang Khuang. It is said that the huge stone jars found in that province are the remains of a celebration party Khun Chuang held after seizing the area from the Vietnamese.

No longer worried about a Chinese invasion, Khun Lo went south to fight Khun Chuang, whom he killed. In 757 Khun Lo built his capital in what today is called Luang Phrabang. Lao people arrived and settled in large numbers, driving the original Lao Theung peoples into the hills. It is said that over the next five hundred years, twenty-two different kings ruled. Only their names remain. The last of these was the father or grandfather of the man Laotians remember as Fa Ngum.

King Fa Ngum

Two stories tell how Prince Fa Ngum was exiled to Cambodia. The first claims he was the youngest child of the Lao king and was born with thirty-three teeth! Advisors to the king thought this was a bad omen and told him to put Fa Ngum on a raft and send him from the kingdom. Accompanied by several dozen attendants, the child floated along the Mekong river for one year until he was rescued by a Khmer monk. The monk cared for the boy until he reached six or seven, before taking him to the Khmer ruler in Cambodia.

Impressed with the Lao boy's intelligence, the Khmer ruler raised Fa Ngum as a Khmer prince and later offered him his daughter in marriage. Fa Ngum and the king's daughter, Nang Keo Keng Ya, lived happily in Cambodia until Fa Ngum's father died. After his uncle took the throne in Laos, Fa Ngum asked for a Khmer army so that he could go north and claim the Lao kingdom.

The second story about Fa Ngum's departure states that when he was an infant, his father was exiled from the Lao royal court for meddling with the harem of the king (Fa Ngum's grandfather). So Fa Ngum's father fled with his child to Cambodia, where they found refuge at the Khmer ruler's court. Both versions agree that Fa Ngum returned to Laos with a Khmer army around 1349.

At this time the Khmer empire as well as the Sukhothai kingdom in central Siam were declining under the power of a new kingdom at Ayutthaya in southern Siam, so Fa Ngum had plenty of opportunities to expand his power. He advanced up the Mekong valley through what are now the Laotian provinces of Champasak, Khammouan, Xiang Khuang, and Hua Phan. Some chiefs agreed to submit to Fa Ngum's rule because they shared a bond of T'ai origins. Fa Ngum conquered any resisters and, feeling bold with victory, he threatened to invade the Vietnamese kingdom. The Vietnamese king sent a delegation, and the two kings were able to agree on a boundary between their territories. People who lived in houses built on stilts were recognized as Lao. The kings wisely decided to use a mountain watershed to decide the boundary. Where the rain water flowed toward the Mekong river was Lao territory; where the rain water flowed toward the Red river was Vietnamese land.

Next Fa Ngum conquered Luang Phrabang, where he was proclaimed king in 1353, after his uncle committed suicide by poisoning himself and his wife. After invading neighboring areas in what is today northern Thailand, Fa Ngum attacked Vientiane in 1356. However, the ruler of that city was ready with an army of men and elephants. The battle was fierce and the ruler of Vientiane was killed, but his son retreated with his army to a town called Vieng Kham.

Fa Ngum's generals were unable to capture this holdout because it was surrounded by a thick grove of bamboo. But King Fa Ngum had a clever plan. He ordered his craftsmen to make arrows of silver and gold, which his army would shoot into the bamboo rampart before retreating. After the people of Vieng Kham watched the enemy retreat, they greedily cut down the bamboo to gather the shining arrows. The king's troops waited until enough bamboo was cleared before they attacked again, this time successfully.

After reorganizing his kingdom, Fa Ngum celebrated his victories. Ten elephants, a thousand oxen and two thousand buffalo were killed for the feast which lasted a week. Later, Fa Ngum announced his policy to his subjects:

> There shall be no thieves and no acts of banditry in our territory. There shall be no fighting and no unnecessary bloodshed among us all. Disputes shall be thoroughly examined and fairly judged. Life sentences shall be pronounced only as a last resort. Those found guilty shall be jailed and released after they have served their terms in prison, so they can resume their normal activities. There must be people in our land before we can produce the things we need.
>
> Our people shall try at all times to avoid disputes and bloodshed and shall cooperate to the best of our ability to defend our territory against aggression from without.
>
> Once every two months our people shall be given an audience with me, and our people shall report to me their sufferings and successes. Once every three years our people shall come to me . . . and we shall together pray to all the guardian spirits of our lands for protection and benedictions.

Fa Ngum's Cambodian wife, however, disliked the Lao worship of spirits. A devout Buddhist, she appealed to her husband to introduce

Buddhism to the Lao kingdom or she would return to her homeland. So the king sent a request to his father-in-law for Buddhist monks, who would propagate the religion in the Lao kingdom. The Khmer king sent Fa Ngum's own childhood tutor as well as twenty-four other religious experts. He also sent the famous golden Phra Bang Buddha, Buddhist books, craftsmen, and musical instruments.

When the Khmer travellers passed through the town of Vieng Kham, the Phra Bang Buddha refused to budge. Until then eight men had carried it, but now not even twenty-four men could lift it; the image stayed where it was. The Khmer began to spread Buddhism throughout the kingdom, so the queen was able to die content in 1368.

After her death, King Fa Ngum's rule deteriorated. Some sources say his officials became corrupt because he was too distracted with grief to supervise them. Others say that he became a despot, was exiled in 1371, and died two years later.

King Sam Saen Tai

Fa Ngum's eldest son was enthroned at the age of eighteen years. He took the royal name of Sam Saen Tai, which means "King of Three Hundred Thousand T'ai," a reference to the number of men in his army. After taking a census of his subjects and reorganizing the administration, he built a temple for his father's ashes, which he had brought home from exile.

At first, some neighboring peoples rejected King Sam Saen Tai's rule, but after he sent armies to persuade them, they recognized him with tribute, including flowers made of gold and silver. He also strengthened his alliances with other rulers by marrying their daughters. He acquired at least five wives this way. When his sons grew up, he sent them to rule over cities in his name. His reign of forty-three years brought peace and prosperity to the Lao. When he died, his thirty-year-old son replaced him as king, ruling until his death in 1428.

Maha Thevi

Subsequent years were full of chaos and murder. Many Lao historians blame Maha Thevi, a female relative of King Sam Saen Tai. It is uncertain if she really was a tyrant or just a woman whom Lao nobles resented for getting involved in politics. Many kings died during this period, but no one knows how or why.

Some Lao historians say Maha Thevi wanted her husband to become king but palace officials had chosen someone else, who ruled for only ten months before he was murdered. The next king survived only eight months. One of Sam Saen Tai's sons was then enthroned but was killed after a year and a half. The fourth choice ruled for five months before he discovered a plot to kill him, after which he fled to another city, where he died.

According to those who think she was a tyrant, Maha Thevi chose the next king, who ruled for six uneasy months before he discovered her plot to murder him and took his own life instead. The sixth unlucky king was murdered after ruling for three years. Then a son born to King Sam Saen Tai and one of his female servants claimed the throne. People thought the young man, Thao Khamkeut, was a reincarnation of his father because he could remember the names of everyone in the palace as well as his father's horses and other pets. Able to convince the palace officials of his rights as heir to the crown, he ruled for two years.

The Lao kingdom's dark years continued until the death of Maha Thevi. Some Lao chronicles claim that she died naturally at age ninety-five, while others say Lao officials decided to get rid of perhaps the first and only woman ruler of Laos . According to the latter, she and her husband were captured, tied together, and laid on rocks with their feet in water. Unable to reach food or water, they died a painful death. Without a king for the next three years, the kingdom was supervised by the country's chief monks.

The next king chosen was a son of Sam Saen Tai and the daughter of the Thai king of Ayutthaya. Xaya Chakkaphat Phenpheo was crowned king in 1456 at the age of forty. He put down a rebellion led by a prince in Vientiane. The rebel prince was kidnapped and executed.

The Lao-Vietnamese War

After King Xaya Chakkaphat Phenpheo had ruled for twenty-three years, a rare white elephant was caught in one of his vassal states and presented to him. A Vietnamese king heard the news and asked that the elephant visit his kingdom. The Lao ruler responded by sending some of the elephant's manure to the king. Furious, the Vietnamese king sent his army to fight the Lao.

The Lao king prepared his army of men and elephants to meet the

Vietnamese army on the outskirts of Luang Phrabang. The battle raged for three days, until the soldiers could barely lift their arms. When the Lao king heard the news that his outnumbered army was being overwhelmed, he and his family fled down the Mekong river. When the Vietnamese entered the city of Luang Phrabang, where they rested, the Lao king's son sent his army from another province and successfully vanquished the Vietnamese.

Although he was invited to resume the throne, the ex-king asked his brave son to take his place. He reigned for seven years before he died. His brother, who took the throne and ruled for ten years, is remembered for signing a friendship treaty with the Thai king of Ayutthaya, in what is now the Thai village of Dan Sai.

King Visulrat, Patron of the Arts

King Visulrat came to power in 1501 and strengthened relations with vassal provinces by marrying his sisters to their rulers. To bring blessings to his kingdom, he also had the Phra Bang Buddha image brought to Luang Phrabang. It has remained there ever since, except for when Thai invaders took it to Bangkok.

The king was a great patron of Buddhism and literature. He encouraged Buddhist philosophers and writers to translate Buddhist writings from Pali to Lao. Under his reign, the legend of Khun Borom was written down by a chief monk, and rules were developed for writing classical Lao poetry.

King Phothisararat's Edict against Spirit Worship

When King Visulrat died in 1520, his teenage son Phothisararat was given the throne. Five years later the king was ordained as a Buddhist monk. After leaving the *sangha* to return to his duties as king, in 1527 he issued a royal decree ordering his subjects to stop the widespread worship of phi. Buddhist temples and shrines were built on the sites of destroyed spirit shrines and altars. This edict apparently earned the Lao king a good reputation with neighboring rulers in Vietnam, southern China, and other places.

Because of family disputes in the ruling family of Xiang Khuang, the king sent his troops there in 1532 and they remained for two years. Soon the king also had problems with his southern neighbors in Ayutthaya. In 1539 he assisted a Thai prince who sought refuge from the ruler of Ayutthaya, and sent troops there. But after waiting ten days without the Thai accepting the challenge, the Lao went home in peace. The king of Ayutthaya responded the following year by sending troops of his own, winning some battles before being stopped by the army commanded by the Lao ruler of Thakhek.

When the ruler of what is now Chiang Mai in northern Thailand died in 1548 without an heir, King Phothisararat sent his fourteen-year-old son by a princess of Chiang Mai to rule it. A large entourage of people and elephants accompanied the young prince and his father. At this time, a Burmese ambassador visited the Lao king in Chiang Mai to request an alliance with the Lao for the invasion of Ayutthaya. King Phothisararat prepared to return to his capital in Luang Phrabang to consider the offer.

On the way he stopped to capture wild elephants. Because there were several foreign diplomatic missions besides the Burmese seeking audience with the Lao king, he decided to invite them all to the elephant field to see the two thousand captured elephants. Wishing to entertain his guests, the king mounted his tame elephant and roped a wild one. As the wild elephant ran madly about, the king's elephant slipped and fell on him. A week later, he died at age forty-three.

King Setthathirath

After making his uncle the ruler of Chiang Mai, Setthathirath returned to Luang Phrabang as king, but not before his half-brother tried unsuccessfully to usurp the throne. When Chiang Mai experienced a bloody power struggle, the Lao king led his army to restore order there in 1555. However, the Burmese king also intervened; King Setthathirath responded by taking a Burmese envoy hostage and returned to Luang Phrabang. The angry Burmese attacked the rear guard Lao troops on the outskirts of the Lao capital.

Threatened by the Burmese, King Setthathirath decided to move his capital to Vientiane; Luang Phrabang was too small and Burmese invaders had attacked it. Food and fertile land were more available in the Vientiane plain. After building a new palace and temple to house the Emerald Buddha in Vientiane, Setthathirath decided to take a wife. He had heard about a family of courageous women in Ayutthaya who died on the battlefield defending their men, and he was determined to marry one of the offspring of

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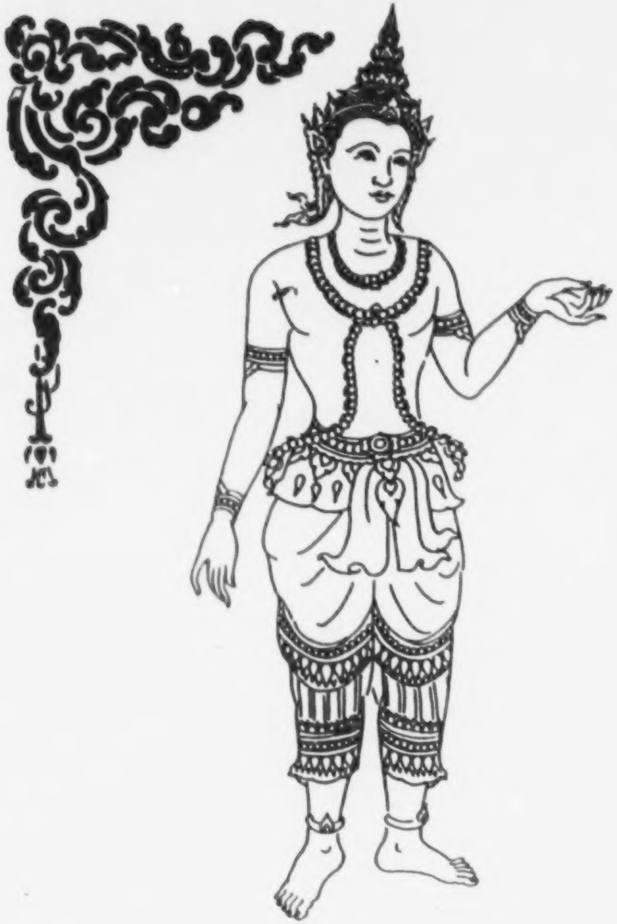

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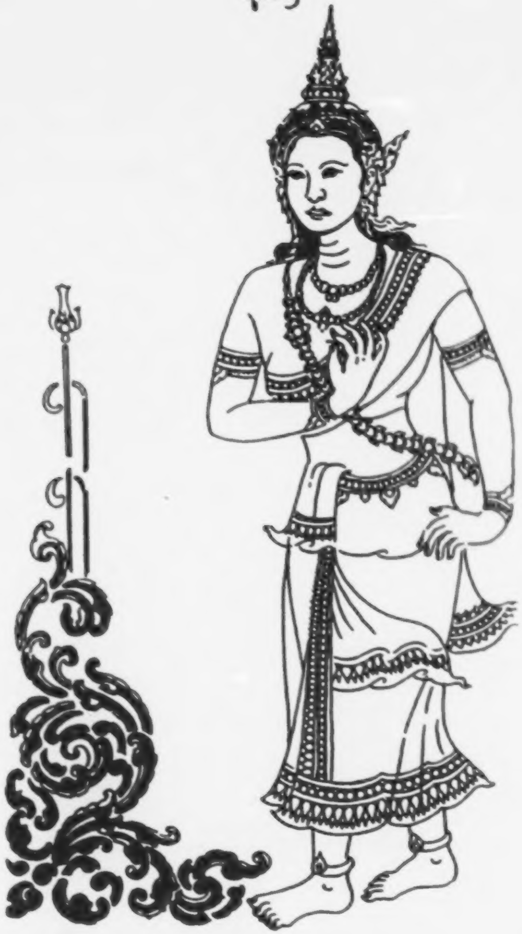


these courageous females. He requested the hand of the Ayutthayan princess, famous for her courage and beauty, to cement the friendship between the two kingdoms.

After considering the proposal, the king of Ayutthaya agreed to the marriage. King Setthathirath sent a royal cortege to escort his fiancee, but an unfortunate incident occurred when the princess suddenly took sick. Without informing the Lao king, her father substituted another daughter and sent her, accompanied by a thousand attendants and many wedding presents. King Setthathirath angrily returned the woman and demanded the original princess. His true bride was finally sent north with an entourage in 1563, after she had recovered from her illness.

While King Setthathirath went to greet his future bride en route, the Burmese invaded the Lao kingdom. King Setthathirath hurried back to Vientiane and ordered his army to drive off the intruders. Successful in defending his kingdom, he then arrested many officials in the capital city and executed some for treason.

In the short peace that followed, the king supported the building and repair of Buddhist shrines. In 1566 That Luang was built on top of an older shrine in a palace garden east of Vientiane. Many wats were built- a German visitor counted 120 wats in Vientiane. The king then built a stupa in Thakkhek and repaired the famous shrine of That Phanom on the other side of the Mekong river. The king also supported the casting of many Buddha statues to earn the religious merit that would protect his reign.

War with the Burmese

Peace did not last. A new ruler in Ayutthaya requested help from King Setthathirath to attack the city of Phitsanulok in what is now central Thailand. Equipped with an army of tens of thousands of men and elephants, the Lao king encircled the enemy city in 1567. Meanwhile, the ruler of Phitsanulok sent a plea to the Burmese for help. The citizens of the city under siege bravely resisted the Lao until the Burmese broke through the Lao perimeter and joined the city's defenders. Lao troops fought for weeks, before withdrawing to set a trap for the pursuing Burmese. The Lao ambushed the Burmese as they passed through a narrow mountain pass; many Burmese died before the survivors could flee home.

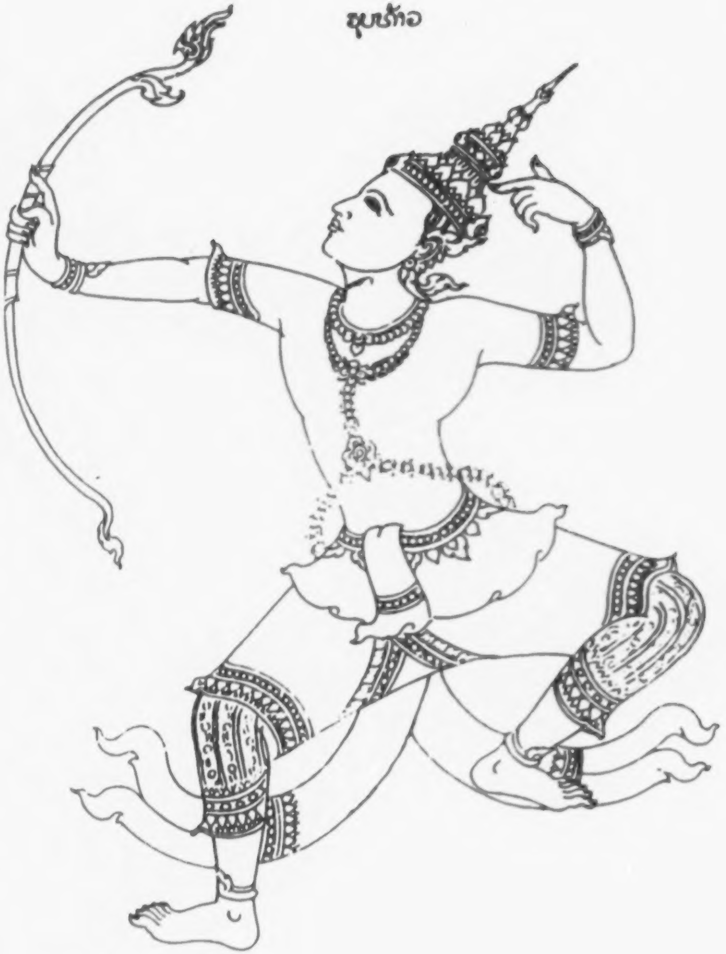
Two years later, the Burmese renewed attacks on Ayutthaya, whose ruler successfully appealed to the Lao king to send his troops south. However, this time the Burmese were waiting in ambush at Saraburi. Despite the surprise, Lao troops were still able to attack first in a battle that lasted two days and two nights before the Burmese commander was killed and his troops scattered. Some of the Lao army continued on to Ayutthaya and clashed with Burmese troops. Outnumbered, the Lao retreated but were followed by the enemy and suffered heavy casualties.

The Burmese conquered Ayutthaya in 1570 and brought the fight to Vientiane. To resist the expert Burmese army, King Setthathirath waged guerilla warfare. He moved all civilians out of the capital so troops would not have to worry about harming them. When the Burmese saw the Lao fleeing, they pursued them. However, each time the Burmese advanced, their enemy continued to withdraw without putting up a fight. The Burmese troops set up camp in Vientiane.

When the rainy season came, the Burmese were plagued by diseases, cutting their fighting ability. They suffered a shortage of supplies because the Lao had taken everything with them when they evacuated. If the Burmese tried to search for food outside the city, they were harassed or killed by Lao guerrilla units. After thousands of Burmese had died from disease and fighting, the Burmese king called the survivors home. The Lao attacked them again en route and then returned to Vientiane.

While King Setthathirath was struggling with the Burmese, two of his disgraced ex-aides were plotting against him. They sent him a false message that a ruler in one of his southern dominions had died. When the king sent envoys, they were rejected by the ruler, who was angry at being considered dead. Hearing of his anger from one of the deceitful nobles, the king sent his army's to a southern city believed to be Attapeu. The king's army was ambushed and nearly annihilated. King Setthathirath was urged to flee to an unknown destination.

Other accounts from Burmese annals and European travelers say that Setthathirath died trying to establish Lao access to the sea through Cambodia. When the Cambodians resisted and scattered Lao troops, the Lao king was never heard from again and was presumed murdered. He had reigned over Lan Xang for twenty-four years.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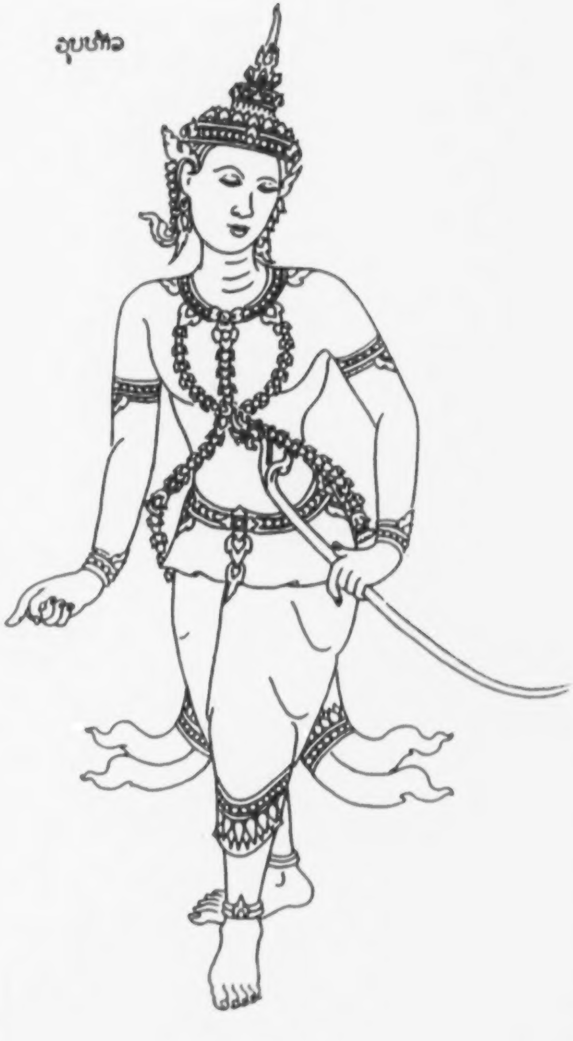
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Civil War in the Lao Kingdom

The Lao kingdom was thrown into conflict when two opposing groups tried to promote candidates to replace the dead monarch. The Buddhist sangha tried to reconcile the quarreling nobles but their success lasted only a few months. Finally one of the two competitors was killed in a fight, and the other, an old man of 65, made himself king in 1571. The rulers and citizens of the various cities under Vientiane's power did not respect the new sovereign, however, because he was not of royal blood. Some of the vassal states avoided cooperating with the Vientiane court and many people migrated from the capital city, going as far south as Champasak.

While the new Lao king was trying to hold his kingdom together, the Burmese took advantage of his weakness and attacked Vientiane in 1574. Because the Lao king lacked legitimacy in the eyes of his people, the residents of Vientiane were not eager to defend their king and city. Many Lao deserted and the Burmese captured Vientiane and made the Lao kingdom a vassal of Burma.

In 1575 the Burmese put King Setthathirath's son on the throne in Vientiane. The new king had lived as a captive of the Burmese for some years, so the Burmese felt they could control him. But in 1579 a man from the southern province of Attapeu challenged the throne, claiming he was a reincarnation of King Setthathirath and had supernatural powers. Unhappy with the present king, the people believed the pretender and supported his army, which took control of Attapeu and other southern cities. The king in Vientiane ordered some of his vassal cities to send troops to put down the revolt, but the rebels succeeded in pushing closer to Vientiane. Finally the king tried to flee with his family to Burma, but en route the royal barge crashed against some rocks in the river and they were drowned.

The Burmese king immediately sent troops to reconquer Vientiane from the rebels and put the commoner king on the throne again in 1580. After the seventy-five-year old king died two years later in Vientiane, his son became king. Like his father, he was not of royal blood, so the Lao were reluctant to have him as their king. After this commoner king was arrested by his own subjects and deported to Burma, the Lao lived without a ruler for seven years.

In 1591 palace officials or Buddhist monks in Vientiane requested the Burmese king to return another captive son of King Setthathirath to rule over the Lao people. Crowned at the age of twenty, Phra No Muang restored peace to the Lao realm. Vassal cities that had disobeyed his predecessor supported the new king, who ruled until he died seven years later without an heir.

The nobles and officials of the Vientiane palace invited his thirteen-year-old cousin to rule. Because the Lao kingdom remained under Burmese control, the latter suggested the boy's father, Phra Vorapita, serve as a ruler until his son was old enough to take up the royal duties. At this time, the Burmese had their own problems with a weak king. During the confusion in Burma, many of the Lao families who had been taken to Burma as prisoners-of-war tried to return home but were caught by Chiang Mai's army. The Lao king then sent the Vientiane army south to liberate the returnees. They captured several cities, but because of a supplies shortage they did not conquer Chiang Mai.

When the Vientiane troops returned home, Phra Vorapita denied them entry and threatened to execute the commanding officers. A family conflict arose when the officers invited the king's young son to leave the city and join them, which he did. Their troops attacked the city in a battle that lasted four months. The fight reached a stalemate with plenty of blood shed by both sides. The Buddhist sangha intervened and brought the opponents together. The son offered apologies and asked forgiveness of his father, who later abdicated to allow his some to become king.

After declaring Lao independence after twenty-four years of Burmese rule, Phra Voravongsa was crowned in 1603. Unfortunately the tragedy of son fighting against father was repeated in the next generation. When the king took his wife and one of his two sons to pay respects to the Phra Bang Buddha in Luang Phrabang in 1621, there were rumors that his other son was going to usurp the throne. The king sent an order from Luang Phrabang calling for the quick arrest and execution of the suspect son.

The rebel prince heard about the order and fled with his supporters. King Voravongsa ordered the loyal son to hunt his own brother down. The fugitive prince sought refuge in a wat and secretly escaped while his brother's troops forced their way into the temple. Meanwhile arsonists set the city of Vientiane on fire, so King Voravongsa raised an army in Luang Phrabang and marched to restore order in his capital.

When news reached him that palace officials had turned against him, the king waited outside the city on the same field where he had challenged his own father years ago. After holding a ceremony to call punishment on the usurper, the king and his family retreated. The rebel prince, Upayuvarad, then sent assassins after them, and the king and queen were killed. Upayuvarad was crowned king of Vientiane in 1622, but he survived only nine months.

After the usurper king's death, palace officials replaced him with the ruler of Muang Sikhotabong (today known as Thakhek). During his reign, the noble responsible for the assassination of King Voravongsa set the new king's palace on fire. A new palace was built on the field outside Vientiane, the site of so much family betrayal.

In 1627, when the king from Thakhek died, King Voravongsa's second son was crowned sovereign of Vientiane. Internal political disputes were destroying the Lao kingdom. High-ranking officials were raising private armies, shattering the Lao kingdom's unity and bringing misery to its subjects. Many citizens chose to flee the capital for safety on the other side of the Mekong river. Lao chronicles do not say much about this period of chaos, except that the various branches of the royal family were competing for power after the death of the king. By 1633 the strongest faction backed Suliyavongsa, who was crowned king of Vientiane.

King Suliyavongsa

The young sovereign deported many of his relatives who might have challenged his reign. He then standardized a system of justice for the kingdom. According to a Lao historian, he endorsed

> worthy legislation and rules that benefitted all of his citizens, regardless of their standing, by observing a just and fair procedure for all alike.

Sadly the law-abiding king sentenced his only son and heir to death when the latter was found guilty of adultery with the wife of a palace official.

King Suliyavongsa supported teachers, thinkers, and writers who conveyed Buddhist values and helped rebuild the Lao kingdom's moral order. Many famous poems were written during the reign of King

Suliyavongsa. Some, such as Xin Xai, a supernatural tale of gods, giants, and heroes, are literary masterpieces which Laotians cherish in the same way English-speakers value Shakespeare's writing.

Suliyavongsa also attended to foreign affairs. Faced with an invasion of northern Lao territory by marauders from China, he negotiated a friendship treaty with the king of Ayutthaya. In 1670 the two leaders agreed on a border between their territories and built a Buddhist shrine at the town of Dan Sai, now in Thailand, to celebrate the alliance.

When the king died after more than half a century of uninterrupted rule, Lan Xang was at a critical point in its history. A unified country, it controlled substantial territory, encompassing most of modern-day Laos. But without an heir to the Lao throne, the future of the Lao kingdom was uncertain and increasingly vulnerable to powerful Vietnamese and Siamese neighbors.

Foreign Domination

During the next ten years, ambitious men fought to rule Laos. The highest-ranking official at the Vientiane court proclaimed himself king and tried to marry a widowed daughter of King Suliyavongsa. Pregnant with her dead husband's child, she and her son, Chao Ong Lo, fled the rejected suitor's wrath. Their supporters mounted an attack against the usurper and executed him. Chao Ong Lo was enthroned and ruled four years until he was killed by another usurper, who in turn suffered the same fate.

After the death of King Suliyavongsa, one of his nephews escaped the political strife in Laos and sought refuge at the Vietnamese court in Annam. Supported by a Vietnamese army, he returned to seize power in Vientiane around 1700. The new king, Xaya-Setthathirath, brought Laos under the control of the Vietnamese kingdom. After appointing his brother to rule over Luang Phrabang, he also had the Phra Bang Buddha moved from Luang Phrabang to Vientiane.

In 1706 two of King Suliyavongsa's grandsons attacked and took control of Luang Phrabang. The ruler of Vientiane appealed to the Thai king in Ayutthaya for help, and the latter reconciled the two factions of the royal family in 1707. From that time, the Lao kingdom was split into two separate kingdoms: Luang Phrabang, dominated by Burma, and Vientiane, which paid tribute to Vietnam and Siam.

Champasak formed a third kingdom in southern Laos in 1713. Champasak had been ruled by a woman called Nang Phao and then her daughter, Nang Pheng, from 1641 to roughly 1714 when the kingdom was handed over to a high-ranking Buddhist monk. The monk later enthroned a grandson of King Suliyavongsa who had fled Vientiane with his mother in 1690. After proclaiming a new kingdom, he organized its administration, built a new capital city, and ruled until 1738. His son, Chao Xaya Kuman, then became king of Champasak.

King Xaya Setthathirath ruled over Vientiane until 1730. He was replaced by a son who went by the name of Siribunyasan. In 1776 the Vientiane kingdom was troubled by officials who tried to raise rebellions in central Laos. The revolts were quelled with aid from Vietnamese troops and neighboring rulers from the Khorat plateau, in what is now Thailand. Because King Taksin of Siam was proving himself a powerful ruler and winning wars against the Burmese, King Siribunyasan negotiated a friendship treaty with the Thai king.

A few years later the king of Luang Phrabang sent troops to attack Vientiane. Facing defeat, the Vientiane king appealed to the Burmese for help. As Burmese troops marched on Luang Phrabang, its army retreated from Vientiane. The king of Luang Phrabang chose to negotiate with the Burmese and offered to become a vassal-temporarily. The Lao kings were jeopardizing their independence by fighting with each other and inviting foreign powers, such as the Burmese, Siamese, and Vietnamese, into the fray.

It appears the kingdoms of both Luang Phrabang and Vientiane offered to support the Burmese in their wars with Siam. Intimidated by Burmese military power, the king of Vientiane allowed his children and seven mandarins to be taken to Burma to be held as guarantees. One Lao historian apologizes for King Siribunyasan's action, saying it was a ploy to lure the Burmese out of Lao territory. However, in 1774, when the king of Luang Phrabang informed the Siamese king of Vientiane's support for the Burmese, King Taksin accused Siribunyasan of deceit and threatened to attack his city unless it supplied food and troops to Siam.

The king of Vientiane complied and gifts were exchanged in 1775-1776. The Siamese sent precious silk fabrics and tapestries. The Lao promised rice and the king's daughter and asked for two thousand rifles. King Taksin agreed to the request for arms and offered military advisers. Demands and counterdemands between Siam and Vientiane escalated for five years, until King Taksin had built up such power in Siam that he could throw the entire Siamese military at the Lao.

In 1777 a Lao nobleman who had rebelled against the king of Vientiane fled south along the Mekong river. Eventually he set up a rebel town and pledged allegiance to the Siamese king. Upon hearing this news, the king of Vientiane sent troops to attack the rebel nobleman. Seizing the opportunity, King Taksin of Siam retaliated against the Lao. His navy of ten thousand men travelled up the Mekong river while his army marched over land. The southern Lao kingdom of Champasak was the first to be conquered by the Siamese invaders in 1777, after sixty-five years as an independent kingdom. Moving north, the Siamese met a strong defense near Vieng Khuk, so they chopped off the heads of people in a neighboring town and floated them on a raft past the Lao who then lost their will to fight.

King Suliyavong of Luang Phrabang offered his troops to the Siamese for their four-month siege of Vientiane. Finally King Siribunyasan lost heart and fled; his son opened the Vientiane city gates to the Siamese. The Siamese looted the city and took its most important Buddha images, as well as the royal family and their officials to Bangkok. The king of Luang Phrabang's plan backfired and soon he came under the same Siamese domination that he had helped inflict on Vientiane. Choosing to compete against rather than cooperate with each other, by 1779 the Lao kings had brought about their own subjugation under the Siamese.

Siamese Rule

When King Siribunyasan died in 1781, the Siamese put his son, Nanthasen, on the Vientiane throne and returned the Phra Bang Buddha. In 1787 the king of Vientiane sent his troops to capture the ruler of Xieng Khuang, who was paying tribute to the Vietnamese. The Vietnamese responded by sending an army of six thousand men from both Vietnam and Xieng Khuang to attack Vientiane, whose king quickly reinstated the ruler of Xieng Khuang in order to avoid a major war. Xieng Khuang was instructed to send tributary gifts of equal amounts to the kings in Vientiane and Vietnam.

After making peace with the Vietnamese, the king of Vientiane turned against Luang Phrabang. He requested permission from Siam to attack Luang Phrabang on the grounds that it was secretly allied with the Burmese. After two weeks of fighting, Luang Phrabang was captured and its king and royal family sent to Bangkok. At this time, tens of thousands of Lao citizens were sent to Siam to dig canals in Bangkok. The work was very hard and many Lao died.

In 1793 the king of Luang Phrabang was returned to his city. Some historians surmise that he complained to the Siamese that King Nanthasen of Vientiane was secretly plotting with Siam's enemies, the Burmese. Politics of the time were very confusing, because Lao who supported the Vietnamese were struggling for power against Lao who favored the Burmese. Some believe that the Vietnamese denounced the king of Vientiane, telling the Siamese he was courting the Vietnamese in order to overthrow Siamese domination of Laos.

The king of Vientiane was summoned to Bangkok, where he died and was replaced two years later by his brother, Chao Inthavong. When the Siamese had conquered the kingdom of Vientiane from King Siribunyasan, they had taken his sons, the princes Chao Inthavong and Chao Anuvong, as hostages to Bangkok. While his brother ruled as King Inthavong, Chao Anuvong served as chief minister and led the Lao army to support the Siamese in battles against the Burmese.

The Rebellion of Chao Anuvong

When King Inthavong died in 1803, Chao Anuvong ascended the Vientiane throne as King Xaya Setthathirath III. After returning from battle with the Burmese, he built a new palace, several wats and libraries, and supposedly a bridge across the Mekong river. Unfortunately his construction plans were upset by war.

In 1818 his troops crushed the Ai Sakiet-Ngong revolt in Champasak. This rebellion, one of many in Champasak's history, was led by a monk who lived in the mountains. He attracted followers by demonstrating the burning power of sunlight through a lens, which he claimed was an example of his magical powers. He then promised to burn the capital city of Champasak with his fiery powers, and organized the believers into fighting units, which attacked and burned the city. One explanation for the monk's revolt is his manipulation by the Siamese governor of Khorat, who wanted to extend his power over Champasak. When the Siamese sent troops to regain the city, the monk fled to the jungles of Attapeu, where he was captured by King Anuvong's son, who later was appointed as the ruler of Champasak by the Siamese king.

King Anuvong's relations with the second king of Siam were friendly, but trouble followed when the Siamese king died in 1825. At the time the Lao noted bad omens: an earthquake in Vientiane and violent storms, which broke the pinnacle of the Phra Bang temple and nearly wrecked the Lao royal palace.

King Anuvong was escorted by hundreds of Lao officials when he attended the funeral of the deceased Siamese king. After the funeral, however, the new Siamese king retained many Lao as laborers to cut palm trees. When King Anuvong requested their release to return with him to Laos, the Siamese king refused. King Anuvong arrived home in 1826 and called a meeting of his advisers and officials to begin planning a war of independence from Siam. Perhaps he intended to fend off the Siamese armies already venturing toward Lao territory. King Anuvong also appealed to the ruler of Luang Phrabang and the ruler of Chiang Mai for help in liberating the Lao from Siamese rule.

King Anuvong sent his troops on the long march to Bangkok in 1827. Lao troops took control of Nakhon Ratchisima easily because its leader was busy fighting a Khmer rebellion elsewhere. The evacuation of Lao people from Nakhon Ratchisima to Vientiane was said to have been completed in four days. Forewarned, the king of Siam prepared to defend Bangkok, benefitting from five thousand soldiers sent by the king of Luang Phrabang.

Next the Siamese king sent his army to Nakhon Ratchisima and diverted some troops toward Champasak. After King Anuvong moved all the people off the Khorat plateau to create a void in front of his Siamese adversaries, he pulled back some of his army, leaving others to stop the Siamese who attacked successfully. With their Lao prisoners, the Siamese troops then advanced to clash with King Anuvong's line of defense.

When King Anuvong heard that his troops were losing battles, he and two of his sons hurried back to organize the defense of Vientiane. King Anuvong's son who ruled Champasak had gone to join the battle against the Siamese, but when he tried to retreat to his kingdom, he was locked out of the capital by some nobles who had decided to back the Siamese instead. Soon afterwards he was captured. The Siamese then appointed the first of four consecutive rulers who governed Champasak until the French took control of the southern kingdom in 1904.

As the Siamese troops advanced toward Vientiane, overrunning the Lao defenders at the Khaow-San pass, King Anuvong escaped with several of his sons to Vietnam. Five days later the Siamese entered Vientiane. They looted the city, cut down all of its fruit trees, ordered the destruction of the city's walls and monuments, and then burned the capital to ashes. Next the Siamese carried away the Buddha images and transported the human population from Vientiane to Saraburi, Suphanburi, and other towns in Siam.

The Vietnamese were upset by the alteration in the balance of power on the peninsula caused by the Lao-Siamese war, and warned that they expected the Siamese to withdraw and allow the Lao population to return home. In July 1828 Vietnamese troops escorted Chao Anuvong back to the ruins of Vientiane. Two Vietnamese interpreters spoke for the former ruler of Vientiane when he met with the Siamese for reconciliation talks, and the king of Vietnam formally requested pardon from the king of Siam on behalf of Chao Anuvong.

Peace efforts were unsuccessful. When Siamese troops in Vientiane refused to supply Chao Anuvong with his rice allotment, Siamese and Lao troops ended up shooting at each other. Chao Anuvong invited Siamese wrath when he sent supporters to dismantle the "Quelling of the Vientiane Revolt" shrine, which had been erected by the Siamese to slander Chao Anuvong's reputation. Chao Anuvong's son led Lao troops in pursuit of Siamese forces and battle resumed. After their commander was wounded, the Lao realized they were outnumbered and that escape was preferable to defeat. Chao Anuvong fled Vientiane on October 19, 1828. Many of his family members who were left behind were taken prisoner by the Siamese, who destroyed Vientiane again.

Chao Anuvong fled to northeastern Laos, heading for China. In mid-November the ruler of the town where he found refuge promised to surrender the famous rebel to Siamese forces if they refrained from invading his area. Chao Anuvong and his family were captured and taken to Vientiane on December 21, and then to Siam. When the prisoners reached Saraburi, Chao Anuvong was confined to a cage defaced with insults aimed at the Lao king. As the cage travelled by boat to Bangkok, villagers came out to view the disgraced king.

Upon arrival in Bangkok in mid-January, the human prisoners were treated like captured beasts. Their cages were small, and the prisoners were allowed to stretch only once a day, when they were fed like zoo animals. The rest of the time they received the abuse of Siamese onlookers. When Chao Anuvong died of exhaustion after eight days, his body was displayed on a pole. King Anuvong died in 1829 at the age of sixty-two, leaving the kingdom of Vientiane with no royal family.

Riled by reports of the atrocious treatment of King Anuvong in Bangkok, the king of Vietnam later ordered the execution of the Lao ruler who had betrayed Anuvong to the Siamese. Soon afterward the Vietnamese and Siamese were engaged in a war over Cambodia, which lasted many years and relieved some of conflict over Laos.

The Ho Chinese Invasions

In addition to local uprisings in Luang Phrabang in the mid-nineteenth century, Chinese tribes known as the Ho invaded the territory from southern China in 1872. The local people tried to fight off the Chinese marauders but after two years of conflict, many Lao were forced to seek refuge in Vietnamese territory. Eventually the Ho assaulted Luang Phrabang and went on to Vientiane in 1874, where they remained for four months searching for hidden treasure. When the Siamese heard this, they surrounded the city and killed most of the Ho, and then continued on to liberate Luang Phrabang.

However, Ho bandits were active in Lao territory for many more years, invading Luang Phrabang and Vientiane again in 1885. When the Siamese regained control in 1889, they replaced Luang Phrabang's tired old king with his son, who went by the name of Sakkarin, the ruler of the "Kingdom of the Million Elephants and the White Parasol." Three years later, the Siamese transferred all territory on the north and eastern sides of the Mekong river to the French.

Student Activities

A. Comprehension: Choose the correct answer.

1. According to Lao legends, the Lao people originally came from
a) the sea
b) a gourd
c) outer space
d) North America

2. King Fa Ngum spent his childhood in the land now known as
a) Myanmar (Burma)
b) Thailand
c) Cambodia
d) China

3. Phra Bang is
a) the Buddhist palladium of Laos
b) the name of a Lao king
c) a river in southern Laos
d) none of the above

4. The name of King Sam Saen T'ai means
a) Patron of Buddhism
b) Mighty Warrior
c) King of Land of One Million Elephants
d) King of 300,000 T'ai

5. Lao kings strengthened political alliances by
a) sending armies or threats to invade
b) marrying princesses from other kingdoms
c) sending gifts
d) all of the above

6. During the period of dynastic struggle and civil war in the 16th century, the Lao kingdom was invaded and became a vassal of
a) Siam (Thailand)
b) Burma (Myanmar)
c) China
d) Vietnam

7. Vientiane, Luang Phrabang, and Champasak were the names of
a) Laotian kings
b) prehistoric kingdoms of Laos
c) the kingdoms controlling Lao territory in the eighteenth century
d) none of the above

8. Throughout its history, Laos has been invaded by
a) the Burmese
b) the Vietnamese
c) the Siamese (Thai)
d) all of the above

9. The Siamese burned Vientiane in 1828 because
a) they were angry at the Lao who had rebelled against Siamese rule
b) they were trying to help the Lao control a plague in the city
c) they were smoking near some rice straw that caught on fire
d) none of the above

10. In the late nineteenth century, the Ho invaded Laos from
a) Cambodia
b) southern China
c) India
d) France

Matching: Match the name with the description.

1. King Sam Saen T'ai
2. Khun Chuong
3. King Siribunyasen
4. King Photisararat
5. King Fa Ngum
6. Chao Anuvong
7. Khun Borom
8. King Visulrat
9. King Suliyavongsa
10. King Setthathirat

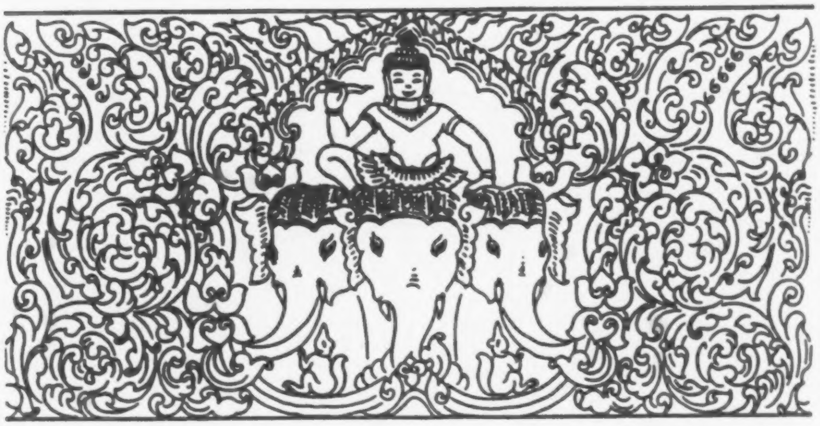
a. Mon-Khmer chief who ruled northern Laos during ancient times
b. Legendary ancestor of the Lao who is said to have descended from heaven
c. Lao king who introduced Theravada Buddhism to Laos
d. Conducted the first population census in Lan Xang
e. Was a patron of Buddhism and Lao literature
f. Forbade the worship of animist spirits
g. Fought the Burmese, and later disappeared in southern Laos
h. Standardized a system of justice for the Lao kingdom
i. Led an unsuccessful struggle for independence from the Siamese
j. Was King of Vientiane when it was conquered by the Siamese

B. Class Discussion: What do you think the stories of Maha Thevi say about Laotian attitudes toward women getting involved in politics? Think of examples of other famous women in history or women active in modern politics. Do people think positively or negatively about such powerful women? Explain your opinions.

C. Creative Writing: Choose a person from this chapter whom you find most interesting. Explain why you think he or she is interesting or important and then describe an imaginary day in his or her life.

D. Time Line: Begin a time line to compare the dates of important events in Laos with those happening in the country of your ancestors or in American history.

E. Essay: Why do you think it is or is not useful to accept local legends and myths as a basis for understanding history? What are the reasons, advantages, and problems of relying on legends or folk tales? Give examples from this chapter or from knowledge of your own community. How is the history of your community usually treated in history books? Do the local word-of-mouth versions of the history of your community agree or disagree with what you read in history books?



Colonialism and Independence

Early Travelers

The earliest Europeans in Laos were traders, Christian missionaries, and scholar-explorers. Among the first visitors to Laos was the Dutch trader named Van Wuysthoff. He was invited by some Lao merchants who were in Indonesia selling stick-lac and benzoin. They asked the governor of the Dutch East Indies to send a trading mission to their homeland. The Dutch agreed to go because they were eager to look for more spices and exotic products to take back to Europe.

Van Wuysthoff, along with two Laotians, sailed up the Mekong river in sampans from Cambodia on July 20, 1641. The trip was difficult: crossing the waterfalls at Khone took twelve days, and the Khemmarat rapids was a back-breaking portage over a hundred miles of rough terrain. The expedition arrived in Vientiane that November.

Drawn by M. Janet Lange from a Sketch by M. Mouhot

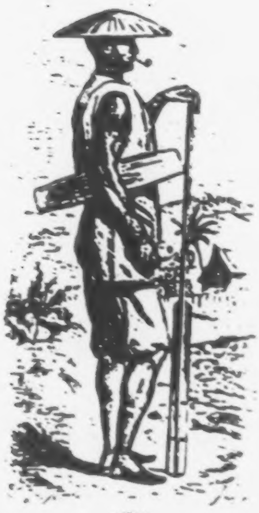
A CHIEF ATTACKING A RHINOCEROS IN THE FOREST OF LAOS.

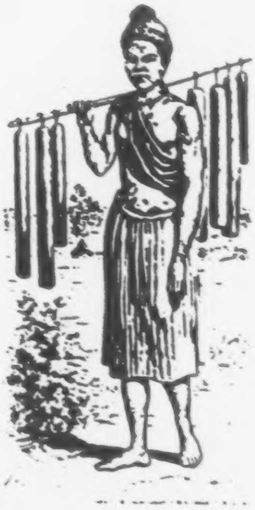
Further north on the river, the trading party noted a road that connected with the Vietnamese coast. The route took twenty-two days to travel and was well used by the Vietnamese who came to Lao territory to trade their silks for Lao fabrics and rhinoceros horns, which were used for medicine. When Van Wusthoff reached Vientiane, he found the Lao experienced in trading with neighboring lands.

Father De Laria, a Portuguese priest who traveled to Vientiane a few years later, had a good impression of the Lao:

> The Laotian people . . . are, generally speaking and as befits their climate and native country, very docile and very good-natured and great lovers of rest and quiet; they welcome Foreigners, make much of them and treat them with great civility. They pride themselves on their great ingenuousness and perfect sincerity, and sure enough they are most frank and sincere, without deceit, most humble and most courteous, of unalterable trustworthiness with regard to all things of whatever sort that are entrusted to them . . . they are all very affable, accommodating, open to reason, and very respectful, neither quarrelsome nor obstinate . . .

The Jesuit priest also noted the absolute power of the king. According to De Laria, King Suliyavongsa owned all land and regarded his subjects' possessions as his private property.





Henri Mouhot: The First European in Luang Phrabang

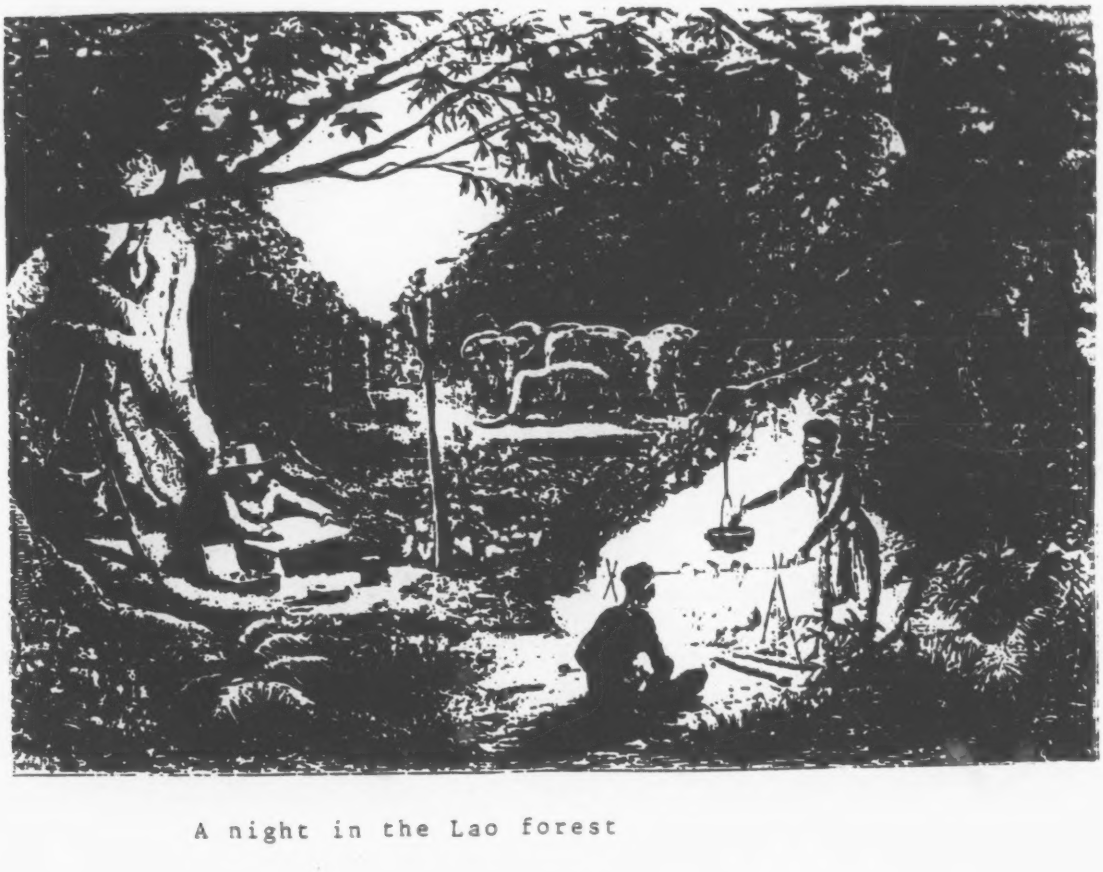
A century later another European adventurer documented his experiences in Laos. The Frenchman, Henri Mouhot, rode elephants from Bangkok north to the mountainous kingdom of Luang Phrabang, over miles of dangerous jungle and malarial swamps. During the last four years of his life he explored Siamese, Cambodian, and Laotian lands to conduct research in geography and the natural sciences. The first European to visit and map Luang Phrabang, Mouhot died there of a fever before he could finish his journey down the Mekong.

In the diary of his trip through Lao territory, Mouhot noted the common sight of little children sick with dysentery and fevers and women with huge goiters. Besides illness, there was the discomfort of stifling heat and humidity as well as insect pests, such as biting ants, flies, mosquitos, and blood-sucking leeches. Elephants were the best way to travel. The huge animals, many of which were captured in the kingdom of Luang Phrabang and sold to the Siamese, could carry three hundred pounds easily and travel ten to twelve miles a day. They could cross deep mud, sharp rocks, enormous fallen trees, and raging rivers. Some Siamese and Lao trading caravans used oxen and buffalo, loading them up with deer and panther skins, benzoin, sticklac, raw silk, woven fabrics from Laos, peacock feathers, ivory, elephants' bones, and sugar.

Luang Phrabang depended on yearly mule trains from southern China. About a hundred Chinese traders would join the trading party, transporting their goods on several hundred mules. Arriving in Luang Phrabang, Mouhot described it as

> a delightful little town, covering a square mile of ground, and containing a population . . . of 7,000 or 8,000 only. The situation is very pleasant. The mountains which, above and below this town, enclose the Mekong, form here a kind of circular valley or amphitheater, nine miles in diameter. . . . Were it not for the constant blaze of a tropical sun, or if the mid-day heat were tempered by a gentle breeze, the place would be a little paradise.

It is fitting that after the explorer Mouhot died at the age of thirty-five in 1861, he was buried near Luang Phrabang, the paradise he so admired.



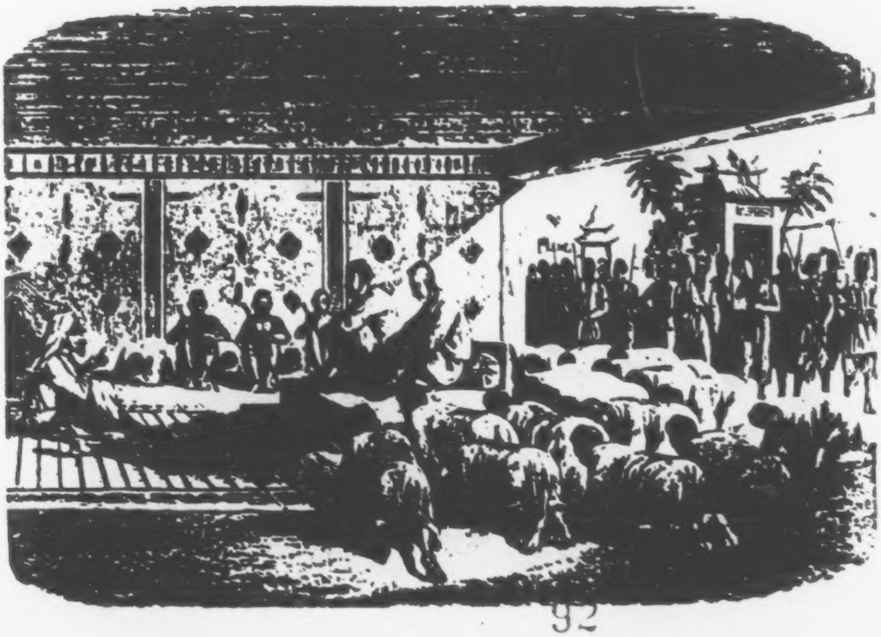
A night in the Lao forest

Francis Garnier: Colonial Explorer

Mouhot's diary is said to have inspired Francis Garnier's trip up the Mekong in 1866. Garnier was a French naval officer already experienced in the colonial conquest of southern Vietnam. He urged the French government to explore the Mekong river as a "back door" to the riches of southern China. The French wanted a route to China that would allow them to compete with Britain, which already had access to China through Burma. The gold, silver, and other minerals of the Mekong river valley also lured the French.

Garnier was only twenty-six years old when he took the river from Saigon to southern China. When the mission returned two years later, Garnier was famous but the Mekong was rejected as too tough a route to China. The Red river in northern Vietnam was tried instead, and Garnier was killed there trying to take control of the river for France.

The Siamese were soon struggling with France for control over Laos. The Siamese loosely controlled the territory between the Mekong and the Annamite Mountain chain. As the French asserted their power over Vietnam, they began to see the sparsely populated Lao territory as room for Vietnamese, and therefore French, expansion.



The French government pursued several strategies to gain control of Lao territory during the Europeans' rush for colonies. By 1884 they had built defence posts along the watershed of the Annamite mountains. They tried to renew traditional Vietnamese claims on the area as part of the kingdom of Vientiane. Scientific exploration and private enterprise also helped the French wrest the Lao kingdoms from Siamese control.

Auguste Pavie: French Colonial Diplomat

In 1886 the French government sent Auguste Pavie to Luang Phrabang to try to gain favor with its king. Initially the Siamese managed to minimize contact between Pavie and the king of Luang Phrabang. However, in 1877, when Ho invaders from China allied with some T'ai minority tribes and attacked Luang Phrabang, Pavie became a hero when he saved the seventy-six year old king from his burning palace. They fled to safety down the Mekong and the French mission tended the ailing king and organized the refugees. Pavie then called for troops from Vietnam to drive off the Ho and the T'ai led by Deo Van Tri. When the French in Bangkok released some of Deo Van Tri's captured brothers, Pavie was able to win over the T'ai minority leaders of northern Laos as well as the king of Luang Phrabang.

Pavie received much support for his second mission to Laos, which lasted from 1889 to 1891. This time he was accompanied by a commercial company from Paris, the French Syndicate of Upper Laos, which investigated the economic prospects of the upper Mekong basin. The burst of activity by French experts and explorers in Laos and northeast Siam challenged Siamese power.

By 1893 Pavie, as resident French minister in Bangkok, was claiming all the Mekong river basin from Khammouan in central Laos for France. The Siamese government rejected such claims and appealed unsuccessfully for British support. The French pressured Siam by tripling their warships near Bangkok.

Eventually the French sailed up the Chaophraya river to Bangkok and demanded all territories east of the Mekong river and the upper Mekong territories as well. The British controlled the Burmese bank of the upper Mekong river. By 1896 the colonial giants had agreed that Britain would give up claims to territory east of the Mekong if the French would accept Siamese independence in the Menam valley (central Siam). In 1904 and 1907 the French got the provinces of Champasak and Xayaburi from Siam.

Colonialism

Because the Vietnamese territories remained the French colonial government's top priority, Cambodia and especially Laos were the neglected hinterlands of the new Franco-Vietnamese empire. Some Lao territories were transferred to Vietnam.

French rule in Laos was mostly indirect. The colonial budget for Indochina allowed for only one hundred Frenchmen in Laos and relied heavily on Vietnamese to staff the colonial administration. The French brought many Vietnamese to Laos to work as administrators and technicians. Later Vietnamese were brought to work in commercial tin mining and agriculture. By 1937 ethnic Vietnamese comprised seventy-five percent of school tutors, and seventy percent of clerks, secretaries, secret police, and navy personnel. Other foreigners, including the Chinese, migrated to Laos to become merchants in the new administrative towns.

Table 4. ETHNIC COMPOSITION OF LAOS' THREE LARGEST CITIES IN 1943

CITY	% VIETNAMESE	% LAO	% CHINESE
Vientiane	53 %	42 %	4 %
Thakhek	85 %	10 %	4 %
Pakse	62 %	14 %	23 %

Indirect Rule and Ethnic Diversity

The French colonialists used a "divide and rule" approach to controlling and taxing the various peoples of Laos. This protected the French from direct conflict with the many minority groups and enabled the administration of distant, isolated areas. In a Lao Theung village, for example, the French named a village headman to levy taxes. The village headman passed the taxes to a Lao Sung tax collector, who reported to a Lao Loum at the district level. The Lao, in turn, was responsible to a Vietnamese bureaucrat who worked for one of the few Frenchmen. This hierarchial system often led to the different groups taking advantage of each other, motivated by prejudice and personal greed.

In 1895 Lao Loum men between the ages of twenty and sixty had to pay a personal tax and serve twenty days of corvee labor. The Lao Theung were taxed at half the above rate. As the years went by, the taxes increased, especially for the Lao Theung. The suffering of the Lao Theung was not new. Previously they had been subjected to slavery and taxes by the Siamese and the Lao. In a subsistence economy, it is hard for rural people to earn money to pay taxes. Government officials, military personnel, Buddhist monks, and the royal family were exempt from taxes.

In the lowlands, the French "kept" Lao royal families to gain legitimacy and public support for French rule. The French elevated the monarch of Luang Phrabang to the status of king of Laos and promised him autonomy in Luang Phrabang, while they demoted the kings of Champasak and Xiang Khuang to the status of governors.

The French colonialists, headquartered in Vientiane, assumed absolute authority and made sure the Lao royalty stayed obedient to France. In 1896, when the prince of Xiang Khuang protested his demotion to governor and encouraged a Hmong rebellion, the French had him deposed and replaced by a relative who had already proven himself a faithful official of the French administration.

Education and Health Services

The colonial rulers went along with Lao traditions when they worked to their advantage. For example, instead of developing a modern school system that would train Laotians to administer the country, the French relied on local Buddhist temple schools to provide two or three years of basic education to Lao boys. The colonial government did not provide school supplies or training to the teaching monks until 1933. In 1940 there were less than three hundred schools for a country of more than one million people. There was no secondary school in Laos until 1947.

Medical services were only available in the cities, where almost no tribal groups lived and even the Lao were a minority. There was one hospital in Vientiane, a clinic in each provincial capital, and medical stations in a few other cities. Malaria, cholera, plague, leprosy, beriberi, tuberculosis, trachoma, smallpox, and venereal disease were the biggest health risks. The French made little progress in eradicating them, although an inoculation campaign for smallpox was attempted.

Infrastructure and the Economy

Rather than invest in social services, the French colonialists built roads. These linked natural resources, such as tin, and agricultural products to regional and foreign markets, provided access for foreign trade goods, and strengthened colonial control of the rugged country. Troops and information could move more easily if there were roads. The French dreamed of an extensive all-weather road network linking Laos with Vietnam rather than with Siam. They built a few roads in central Laos to help export the tin being mined by a French company with more than six thousand Vietnamese workers.

There was not much commercial agricultural production in Laos. Most Lao raised only enough rice, maize, vegetables, fruit, cotton, and silk for home or local consumption. Early in the colonial era, European trading companies collected rubber from branch factories in Luang Phrabang and Vientiane, where rubber tapped from wild trees was processed. Exports of sticklac from provinces such as Hua Phan had declined by the 1930s, but coffee production was increasing on the Bolovens plateau in southern Laos.

The Opium Monopoly

Laos' scanty population did not yield much revenue for the colony in personal and business taxes. Opium was the biggest money earner in the colonial economy. The French colonial government controlled the manufacture and sale of opium, a drug popular among colonial subjects and Europeans. At the turn of the century, the colonial government opium sales more than doubled in just four years. Xiang Khuang province was the source of most of the narcotic. Minorities such as the Hmong legally produced and sold opium to the government, which then resold it in Indochina's opium dens and shops.

The high profits and easy transport of opium also encouraged illegal trading. Many Indochinese could not afford the high French prices for opium, so addicts sought cheaper, illegal opium smuggled to Laos from China and Burma. The opium growers who managed to hide some of their crop from the French could trade opium to Chinese merchants, who brought goods such as silver, cloth, and tools on their mule trains.

Reaction to Colonialism: Revolt

In 1901 a Lao Theung rebellion began in the region of the Bolovens plateau. Inspired by a *messianic* religious movement, the revolt was an expression of frustration over French taxes, trade regulations, and forced labor on projects such as road-building and Mekong navigation improvement. The rebellion lasted thirty-five years. Led by a holy man named Ong Keo, who was knowledgeable in Lao and Pali as well as his own tribal language, fifteen hundred armed Lao Theung rebels assaulted French troops in Saravan. Soon the French commander was claiming his soldiers faced more than seven thousand rebel troops. It was not long before the revolt spread to other minority groups in the mountains of Vietnam.

By 1902 the French were fighting back aggressively. They fired on several thousand unarmed Laotians protesting in Savannakhet and burned crops and moved villages on the Bolovens plateau until they

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had driven the rebels into the Annamite mountains. In 1910 the French assassinated Ong Keo and preserved his severed head in formaldehyde.

Another Lao Theung leader, Kommadam, avoided capture. For twenty years he tried nonviolent methods to alert the colonial authorities to the abuses suffered by his people. He wrote many polite letters to important French officials in Laos. One of his letters requested the colonial authorities draw up laws to clearly state how they would administer the Lao Theung, arguing that:

> we do not see ourselves in any obligation to any authority which does not draw up a written statute with us. . . . we deign not to remit taxes to an authority which refuses to accord us a statute, fearing misfortune for our descendants in the way that we have encountered difficulties with the administration in the past.

The French response was to demand an unconditional surrender from Kommadam and his followers.

The global economic depression of the 1930s meant lower prices for the coffee and cardamom produced on the Bolovens plateau. But prices for items such as the cloth or iron desired by the Lao Theung remained high, and famine plagued southern Laos. The fires of revolt flared again until Kommadam was shot in 1936. His son, Khampan, described his father's death:

> In the final phase, the French bombed us from the air and moved up with three battalions of troops, 200 elephants, horse-borne troops and Alsatian dogs to track us down. My father and my eldest brother, Si Thon, laid an ambush for their advance party, but the French were shown another track by a traitor and surprised our headquarters from behind. We rushed out at the noise of the dogs but my father had forgotten his pistol. As he ran to get it, he was shot in the back. The elephants were used to trample down our houses and the people inside them. Sithon was wounded and taken prisoner with another brother. Three younger brothers were thrown into a ravine and three still smaller ones were shot or died later of starvation. The elephants were used to

> charge into the villages and any of our people who survived were shot or bayoneted.

Kommadam's sons, Khamphan and Sithon, continued the anticolonial struggle after World War II. Both eventually became leaders in the **Pathet Lao** revolutionary movement.

In northern Laos, the Lu minority tribe were unhappy when the French annexed Lu territories (Muang Ou and Muang Sing) straddling the border between southern China and Laos. The French promised autonomy for the Lu but were soon raising taxes, appointing officials, and bringing in troops. Next the colonialists stripped the traditional Lu leaders of their power and prestige.

When the French tried to arrest Lu leaders for resisting, they were met with weapons and plots to assassinate French officials. In 1910 the colonial government sent in a French *counterinsurgency* expert, fresh from having dealt with similar experiences involving the Lao Theung on the Bolovens plateau. The French secured the area by driving the Lu rebels across the border into southern China.

In November 1914 Chinese opium traders stormed the colonial office at Sam Neua in northeastern Laos. Seizing money, opium, and weapons, the rebels continued on to northern Vietnam, where they fought colonial military forces before retreating to southern China. Although the leaders of the revolt were said to be from China, they gained local support from members of the Black T'ai minority and six to seven hundred Lao Loum and Lao Theung mine workers. The Chinese leaders proclaimed a new country in Sam Neua and paid for everything they requisitioned from their subjects. When the French finally subdued the rebels, they explained the revolt as a reaction to a recent crackdown on opium smuggling.

The French administrators blamed the Hmong rebellion that lasted from 1919 to 1921 on Hmong "sorcery," Hmong resentment of poor treatment by greedy tax collectors, and colonial neglect of the Hmong. One French observer at the time remarked that

> (W)e have been 25 years in Meo (Hmong) country and we don't know a word of their language, we are unable to have interpreters, nor (Hmong) schools, military

> (conscripts) or administrators . . . no study of the Meo exists. . . . The Meo say, we do not see you.

The Hmong revolt, which began on the Vietnamese-Chinese border, was ignited by the arrest of a Hmong sorcerer and inflamed by over-taxation by corrupt T'ai and Hmong officials. Rumors spread that a Hmong king and queen had appeared, calling on the Hmong to abandon their rice fields. Messianic tales had spread to the Mien people in Laos by early 1919. During the following year, the rebels expanded their territory deep into Laos until a huge military effort, involving troops from all over Indochina, was organized to break the revolt.

The Hmong and the Mien rebels burned villages and captured or killed those who did not support them. The Lao Sung rebels were anti-French, anti-T'ai and anti-Lao, and they treated the Lao Theung badly. Eventually the loose coalition of Hmong clans began to break down under French pressure, and the Lao Sung resumed paying their taxes. The rebellion's leader, Batchai, was killed near Luang Phrabang in late 1922.

Colonialism in Laos was not a peaceful, simple, or productive experience. As part of the French colonial domain in Southeast Asia, Laos was overshadowed by its Vietnamese and Cambodian neighbors. Laos consisted of only seven percent of Indochina's population and contributed only one percent of its foreign trade. The development of Laos was ignored except when local complaints inflamed regional revolts.

As the independence of Laotians was eroded and economic burdens such as taxes grew heavier, Laotians began to reject the demands of the colonial state. At first their reactions were scattered across a variety of ethnic groups and geographic regions. But when the events of World War II helped a nationalist movement to build unity and organization, Laotians were ready to press for independence from France.

Prince Phetsarath

French rule over Laos relied on the cooperation of Laotian elites, who in return benefitted from special privileges, such as opportunities for educating their children in Vietnam and France. Ironically it was these favored sons and daughters who rejected colonialism and tried to restore Laotian identity. The family of the viceroy of Luang Phrabang provided such patriots. The very different lives of three brothers from this family, Prince Phetsarath, Prince Souvannaphouma, and Prince Souphannouvong, illustrate the changes and choices being made in Laos in the early decades of this century.

The eldest brother, Phetsarath (1890-1959), is a shining example of Laotian intellect, diplomacy, and patriotism. After French schooling in Saigon, he went to France to attend the Colonial School, which trained future administrators of the French colonies. During his years in Europe, he also traveled to Switzerland and England. His biographer noted how living in Europe had shaped him:

> (H)e is a democrat. He has studied the customs and traditions of foreign countries such as England and France in the mother countries themselves, not from the colonial riffraff. He has seen what is good and desirable.

When he returned to Laos in 1914, he took a job as a clerk at the Royal Treasury in Luang Phrabang. His career advanced quickly. By 1919 he was the director of the Lao Civil Service, where he worked hard to systemize the country's administrative bureaucracy and established a school of law and public administration. In 1923 he became inspector of Lao Political and Administrative Affairs and set up a Laotian consultative assembly of district chiefs and provincial chiefs. The assembly was a step toward a unified system of government by Laotians for Laotians.

Along with his efforts to build a unified, professional national bureaucracy staffed by Laotians, Phetsarath promoted Laotian culture. He founded a library for religious and foreign books. As head of the Buddhist Council of Laos, he reorganized and established Pali schools for monks. He also encouraged Lao monks to study in Cambodia. Laos got its own Buddhist institute in 1937, a bulwark of Laotian rather than French culture.

The Growth of Lao Nationalism

During World War II, the French took measures to promote Lao culture and nationalism as a way of protecting the French colony from Thai expansion. In 1940, after the Vichy regime controlled by Germany took power in France, the Thai government called for the return of colonial areas once ruled by Siam. The Thai also made bold offers to welcome their Lao brothers into one pan-Thai homeland.

In 1941 the French began radio broadcasts and a weekly newspaper in the Lao language. Some of the Lao elite attempted to convert their written language to a *romanized* alphabet, but most Lao preferred the traditional script. There were also efforts to build a Laotian military force, and by 1943 the first all-Laotian light infantry battalion was formed.

The Lao cultural movement and the renaissance of Lao music, dances, drama, and literature, inspired nationalism among young Lao Loum. Thousands of new schools expanded the national education system. One Lao member of the movement described the flowering of a new Lao identity:

> (E)very student had to get up early in the morning, salute the flag, and do drilling exercises. . . . We also sang songs . . . that would not let us Lao forget that Laos still exists in the world. . . . We were well disciplined which gave us the feeling that Lao can rule themselves rather than the French or Vietnamese and we also speak the same language.

While the French viewed strong Lao nationalism as an important defense against the Thai, the movement also planted the ideas of national pride and independence in young Laotian minds, bringing about the eventual end of French rule.

The Franco-Thai War

The Franco-Thai War was fought across the Mekong river during December 1940 and January 1941. The end of the war was mediated by the Japanese, whose troops later arrived in Thailand on December 8, 1941. France had to surrender to the Thai the Laotian territories of Champasak and Xayaburi, the site of the royal teak forests and graves of Luang Phrabang's royal family. To keep the Lao king from abdicating and entering a monastery and to regain Lao respect after such a devastating loss, in August 1941 the French regime signed the first formal treaty to define the French protectorate of Luang Phrabang. The treaty expanded King Sisavangvong's control to include the areas of Xiang Khuang, Vientiane, and Houei Sai, all of which had previously been under direct French rule. Phetsarath was named both viceroy and prime minister of a newly established Laotian cabinet for the enlarged kingdom of Luang Phrabang.

The French colonial government in Indochina cooperated with the Japanese military, allowing the Japanese a base for attacking southwestern China, a source of war materials, such as rubber, oil, and rice, and an invasion route to Indonesia. The long-term Japanese goal was to integrate Southeast Asia into the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, which was set up along the lines of the British Commonwealth. The direct impact of the Japanese was light because, until January 1945, Japan maintained only thirty-five thousand troops in Indochina.

The Japanese Coup

On March 9, 1945, the Japanese overthrew the French colonial government. Phetsarath wrote that the army of the Rising Sun reached the outskirts of Vientiane and later entered Luang Phrabang. With their shaven heads, resembling those of Buddhist monks, the Japanese soldiers took boats from several monasteries and floated into town. When they landed, they carried weapons instead of alms bowls.

Before fleeing to the forests and hills, the French military gave out guns and told the Lao to defend their country to the death. There was little fighting, however, because a Japanese military envoy arrived from Saigon with the news that Japan approved of independence for

Laos. Independence was proclaimed by King Sisavangvong of Luang Phrabang on April 8, 1945.

The Laotian Resistance

The summer before the Japanese surrender in 1945 was an exciting time for Laotian nationalist groups intent on safeguarding their independence for the postwar era. The oldest organization worked from bases in the mountains of northeast Thailand. Members were trained and armed with the help of American soldiers working underground. In return Americans got military intelligence useful in the war against the Japanese. Meanwhile, the Lao resistance planned to keep France from regaining power in Laos after the defeat of Japan.

After the Japanese surrender on August 15, 1945, Phetsarath tried to convince the Lao king to officially unify the country and declare the treaty of the French Protectorate invalid because the French had been unable to protect the Lao from either the Thai or the Japanese. When the king said he intended to have Laos resume its former status as a French colony, the prince assumed he was under pressure from the French and waited a week before proclaiming a unified, independent Laos himself on the basis of public opinion. The king dismissed Phetsarath from his position.

In Vientiane supporters of Laotian independence formed a new government and announced the dismissal of the king in October. A short time later some members of the **Lao Issara** ("Free Lao") government crossed the Mekong river and followed Hmong opium trails through the mountains to exile in Thailand.

Prince Souphanouvong

Phetsarath's younger halfbrother, Souphanouvong, made his debut as a rebel leader at this time. Born in 1909, he went to school in Hanoi and later France, where he graduated from a university as a civil engineer in 1937. During his youth, Prince Souphanouvong traveled through the French countryside and North Africa.

When he returned to Indochina, he was posted to Vietnam as an engineer with the colonial Public Works Service and married a Vietnamese girl. While building bridges in central Vietnam from 1938 to 1945, Prince Souphanouvong made useful contacts with Vietnamese communists (including Ho Chi Minh) who were actively seeking independence from France.

In November 1945 the *Indochina Communist Party* (ICP) issued secret instructions about the need for unity among Vietnamese, Cambodians and Laotians in the anticolonial struggle. The communist leaders decided that the only way to prevent the French from returning to power in Indochina was to fight a united front against colonialism. Phetsarath noted that

> Ho Chi Minh was concerned about the whole of Laos east of the Mekong river. As long as the French still had military influence there, it would be like a spear in Ho Chi Minh's side. It was necessary for Uncle Ho to defend himself by extending his forces into Laos.

In September 1945 Souphanouvong returned to Laos, accompanied by Vietnamese military advisers, and was invited to join the new independent government as a minister.

The Lao Issara

The first independent modern Lao regime, known as the Lao Issara, or Free Lao, government, was short-lived. By 1946 the French were rearmed and returning to Laos in force. Individual American military personnel said they supported independence for Laotians, but the U.S. government reversed President Roosevelt's anticolonial position and allowed France to resume its role as colonial master. The U.S. changed its policy because it was increasingly concerned with the security of postwar Europe, not Asia, and the expansion of the Soviet Union's power.

After the French made a temporary peace pact with Ho Chi Minh's Democratic Republic of Vietnam (north Vietnam) in March 1946, they concentrated on Laos. Gradually the Lao Issara strongholds succumbed to the weapons and warplanes of the French.

The Lao Issara troops suffered shortages of food and arms. The Lao resistance movement was also weakened by ethnic divisions. There were continued clashes between Vietnamese in Laos who supported the Viet Minh and the Lao nationalists who were concerned about the expansion of Vietnamese influence in Laos.

Vicious fighting in Savannakhet and Thakhek in March 1946 forced many Laotian civilians to cross the Mekong river to seek refuge in Thailand. One participant described the battle vividly:

> (T)hree or four British Spitfires came and strafed us. Then they dropped their bombs on the market, which was full of people buying and selling things, especially women and children. A dozen were killed and we didn't count the wounded. After that, the second wave bombed both the Lao and the Vietnamese military camps . . .
>
> At that time, the people of Thakhek crossed . . . filling the river with boats. Some of the boats capsized and many women and children drowned . . . In the afternoon we could see a tank . . . (which) was shooting at the boats which had escaped, and many people were cruelly killed. . . .
>
> We had to snatch those corpses from the fish, of which there were great numbers. After that, I couldn't eat nhon fish for more than 10 years. Every time I saw one I remembered the events of Thakhek.

The Lao Issara finally retreated to Thailand, where they regrouped and formed a government-in-exile. During the next year, civilian leaders such as Phetsarath met with diplomats and arms dealers trying to get political and military support for the independence effort.

During the early postwar period, independence was a wildfire burning across Asia. With the *indigenous* people of Burma, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Indonesia all supporting national liberation movements, competition for black market weapons caused their prices to rise. After a secret meeting, representatives from the five countries agreed to cooperate in buying arms and in providing sanctuary to other liberation groups.

The relationship of the rebels in Indochina was also clarified:

> Laos and Cambodia had small populations and were unable to fight large battles, but they would work as guerrilla bands seeking every possibility to weaken the

> French. They would stay in Cambodia and Laos and not join forces with Vietnam. . . . Whenever the Vietnamese fought a large battle, the Cambodians and the Lao would begin guerrilla warfare to harass the French as much as possible.

Souphanouvong retained his power as head of the Lao Issara military and foreign affairs. The resistance troops were based in the Thai provinces bordering the Mekong river and slipped into Laos for hit-and-run attacks. The French estimated the Laotian rebels in Thailand numbered as many as twelve hundred in 1946-1947.

Laotians Divided

Some Laotians opposed the resistance movement. A southern Lao leader, Prince Boun Oum Na Champassak, and his many followers cooperated with the French because they believed that Laos was not ready for independence, and that it could not take on a militarily superior country such as France.

There were divisions and tensions even within the Lao Issara. Phetsarath was said to prefer a royal Lao government that kept ties with France. Souvannaphouma, deputy prime minister of the government-in-exile and brother of Phetsarath and Souphanouvong, began to favor negotiations with the French, hoping for a peaceful transition to independence. The youngest brother, Prince Souphanouvong, preferred total independence from France and freedom from Thailand as well as from Vietnam.

The *Viet Minh* continued to support the anticolonial struggle, especially in the Laotian regions bordering Vietnam. In August 1946 the Committee of Lao Resistance in the East was formed; it included Faydang, an anti-French Hmong leader, and Kaysone Phomvihane, who became the president of Laos. The movement focused on cooperating with ethnic minority tribes. The Viet Minh helped by providing rice, salt, sewing needles, clothing, guns, and ammunition to the Lao Sung and Lao Theung mountain villages where the Lao communists harassed the French.

In 1948 a *coup d'etat* in Thailand had important consequences for the Lao Issara exiles in Bangkok. Their Thai hosts ordered the Lao

Issara rebels to leave the country. Thailand had already returned Lao territories seized in 1941 to France in order to win favor and get membership in the newly created United Nations. With Cold War fears chilling Southeast Asia, the Thai government now considered a French regime in Laos preferable to an independent Lao nation that might be tied to Vietnam.

After disagreements over his command of aggressive military actions on the Lao-Burmese-Chinese border, Souphanouvong split from the Lao Issara in May 1949. Before he resigned to set up another resistance movement, he criticized the elitism of the Lao Issara leadership, noting the need for broader popular support:

> Ho Chi Minh will never talk with bluffers or pseudoresistance fighters. He would use those simply as instruments of his Indochinese policy or of Vietnamese victory.

His brother, Souvannaphouma, who had been working for the Thai Electric Company, returned to Laos in October 1949 under amnesty with twenty-five other Lao Issara leaders. When the Lao Issara dissolved, Souvannaphouma quickly rose in importance to the French as a Lao political leader compatible with French plans for Laos. Born in 1901 in Luang Phrabang, he had studied in Hanoi and later graduated with degrees in architectural and electrical engineering from schools in Europe and had worked for the French colonial administration's public works service in Laos.

Phetsarath foresaw conflict between his younger brothers- one supported by France, the other by Vietnam. With little hope for an absolute victory on either side, the eldest brother remained in Bangkok and warned:

> For the time being, I will let you fight, my dear brothers, for your opinions are different; but in the end you will both have to come to me.

French-Laotian Relations and America

Meanwhile the French had changed their strategy in Laos by recognizing unification of the country under the king of Luang Phrabang while retaining political, military, and economic authority. Elections were held and in March 1947, the Laotian Constituent Assembly was convened. This first attempt at formal self-rule since colonialism took power led to a new constitution and limited *autonomy* for Laotians within the *French Union,* an organization created to represent the peoples of France's overseas possessions.

By 1949 the French let Laos apply for independent membership in the United Nations and raise its own army, which would remain under a French commander-in-chief. Friendly diplomatic accords were signed between Laos and France in July 1949, and in February 1950 the American government officially recognized the French-backed Boun Oum na Champassak as the prime minister of Laos.

At first the U.S. government tried to negotiate direct economic and military aid to Laos, but such aid ended up funding French battles against rebels such as Souphanouvong. This was the beginning of American involvement in the war in Indochina. With the start of the Korean War in 1950, the U.S. government threw its support solidly behind the French, perceiving the continuing anticolonial conflict in Indochina as part of the world-wide threat of communist expansion. By 1953 it was estimated that the U.S. was paying for seventy percent of France's war in Indochina. Cold War opponents such as the People's Republic of China (PRC) likewise strengthened their support of communist allies, including the Viet Minh.

Laos in the French Indochina War

In August 1950 Souphanouvong and various Lao communists and ethnic leaders met at Viet Minh headquarters in Vietnam. At this meeting, the Laotian communists and their Vietnamese advisers planned their national liberation struggle and established a resistance government headed by Souphanouvong. Other leaders in his new Pathet Lao regime included members of the current Lao government such as Kaysone Phomvihane and Nouhak Phoumsavanh.

As the temporary peace between the French and the Viet Minh regime in northern Vietnam eroded, Lao territory became key terrain during the first Indochina War. Laotians were caught in the middle:

> The Viet Minh accused the Lao of being French stooges and dragged them off and killed them, and the French accused them of being Viet Minh stooges and dragged them off and killed them. Their houses and their rice were burned and destroyed by both sides. In fear and starvation, the people shivered like small birds and begged for help and protection.

The French identified three Laotian areas in their defense strategies: Sam Neua, close to Dien Bien Phu; the Plain of Jars in Xiang Khuang; and Seno, France's major airbase near Savannakhet. Meanwhile the Viet Minh were building loyalties among the Pathet Lao and hill tribes in eastern Laos. One Laotian writer notes that although the Pathet Lao requested only weapons from the Viet Minh

> Uncle Ho's side could not give weapons, but they sent men to help. By their agreement, for every three Lao there would be one Vietnamese, i.e., for every Lao battalion there was a Vietnamese company. The Vietnamese assisted in fighting, and they helped maintain the weapons they had loaned because the Free Lao could not afford to buy them. The Free Lao soldiers received no salary, only food and weapons.

During the winter of 1952-1953, the Viet Minh prepared to expand deep into Laos in the war against the French, taking advantage of the mere three thousand colonial troops based in Laos. With the aid of Pathet Lao allies, the Vietnamese successfully infiltrated Lao territory, collecting intelligence and rice to stash along planned invasion routes.

In April 1953 Vietnamese troops entered Sam Neua unchallenged, while the French and Lao withdrew through "spiny bamboo thickets, forests of wild banana trees or oaks, and arid plateaus." They then climbed a mountain pass and forded thirty rivers to arrive at the Plain of Jars, the hub of road links in northern Laos.

The Viet Minh caught up with the retreat and massacred it. Only one-third of the pro-French troops survived.

Another smaller group of Viet Minh advanced toward Luang Phrabang and linked up with the invaders of Sam Neua. The French prepared to defend the royal capital, despite the prophecy of an old, blind Buddhist monk called Pho Sathou, famous for his accurate predictions of the future, who calmed the Lao citizens with his forecasts that the Vietnamese would not invade the city. The Lao king, who refused to be evacuated by the French, remained in his palace.

The Viet Minh troops sped toward the royal capital, leaving behind heavy weapons, ammunition, and food. But they stopped short of invasion, perhaps because of a successful, albeit small, French ambush or the impending onset of the monsoon rains. Some argue that Lao nationalists secretly persuaded the Viet Minh to go. The people of Luang Phrabang sighed with relief at the departure of the Viet Minh and were refreshed a few days later when a massive thunderstorm and heavy rains discouraged further fighting in the mountainous region.

When the Viet Minh invaded central Laos near Thakkhek after the rainy season ended in December 1953, they took away four thousand bags of government rice from the city before disappearing into the hills, where they gathered support among ethnic tribes. One Laotian writer explained why the Viet Minh rather than the Pathet Lao played such an active role:

> If the full fighting force of the Free Lao had been used, there probably would have been none left by this time. With the advice of the Prince, he decided to let the Vietnamese army, who hated the French to their black bones, go in and take the fullest measure of revenge upon them.

Souvannaphouma, who had become leader of the French-backed government of Laos in 1951, waited patiently until the Viet Minh-French battles in Laos in 1953 had ended before formally requesting the transfer of all services and administrative powers to his government. On October 22, 1953, French and Laotians signed two treaties that resulted in the independence Laotians had sought for so long. The French still did not leave Indochina.

Responding to Viet Minh military actions, the French had transformed the valley of Dien Bien Phu, astride one of the traditional Vietnamese invasion routes to Laos, into a huge armed camp by the end of 1953. By the beginning of the next year, the valley was encircled by Viet Minh forces and their big guns. It was the final battle of the French in Indochina.

Later the Royal Laotian Armed Forces, under French command, marched east to rescue the seventy-six survivors of the sixteen thousand French forces who fought in the bloody siege of Dien Bien Phu. They were grim witnesses to the final battle of France's decade-long Indochina War. Three thousand of the twenty thousand strong Laotian Armed Forces lost their lives fighting against the Viet Minh and Lao guerrillas.

The 1954 Geneva Peace Accords

The French defeat at Dien Bien Phu fatefully occurred on the morning of the same day that peace talks concerning Indochina began in Switzerland. Representatives, both communist and noncommunist, of partitioned Vietnam, as well as Britain, Cambodia, the Peoples' Republic of China, Laos, the Soviet Union, and the United States, sat at the negotiating table in Geneva. There were no representatives of Laotian and Cambodian resistance movements. The communist Vietnamese from the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (north Vietnam) argued for their inclusion in any discussions aimed at securing peace in Indochina, but their pleas were dismissed.

During the negotiations on foreign military forces in Laos, the communist Vietnamese initially claimed that there were no such Vietnamese forces, but eventually they agreed to withdraw all "Vietnamese People's Volunteers" from Laos within four months. The members of the Pathet Lao resistance movement were supposed to regroup in the northern provinces of Sam Neua (already their headquarters) and Phong Saly, to be either demobilized or integrated into the Royal Lao Army controlled by the government in Vientiane.

No fresh troops or armaments were to be brought into Laos after the cease-fire deadline set for August 6. The only foreigners allowed to keep bases in Laos were the French who were to cut their military presence to two bases and thirty-five hundred men. Another fifteen hundred Frenchmen were allowed to stay as advisers to the Royal Lao Army.

The Royal Lao Government (RLG), represented by Phoui Sananikone, promised to cut foreign aid as well as "to integrate all citizens, without discrimination, into the national community." However, nobody mentioned specific details on how the Pathet Lao supporters or the two regrouping provinces would come under the Royal Lao government's national authority.

All of the countries represented, with the important exceptions of the U.S. and the Republic of Vietnam (south Vietnam), agreed in a declaration

> to respect the sovereignty, the independence, the unity and the territorial integrity (of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam) . . . and to refrain from any interference in their internal affairs.

The American government may have abstained because it was already divided over the Indochinese situation. Some influential members of the U.S. military had begun to suspect that the problems and planning behind the Asian war could be traced to communist headquarters in Peking and Moscow. In his famous "domino" speech, President Eisenhower warned that without vigilance, communists would take over the countries of Southeast Asia.

War Resumes

The first hope for ensuring peace in Indochina lay in supervision by the *International Control Commission* (ICC), an international team from Canada, India, and Poland, charged with overseeing the cease-fire. Some Laotians argued, however, that the international observers concentrated more on enjoying personal comforts and an expensive lifestyle in the cities, rather than maintaining peace in the jungles of Laos. By April 1955 the ICC was withdrawing from Laos, and the experience was judged a failure by the Royal Lao Government, which published its complaints of Pathet Lao and Vietnamese violations the following month.

The Royal Lao government also tried to muster international support and Vietnamese and Chinese guarantees of noninterference at meetings in Indonesia and India. It appeared that relations between the Royal Lao Government and the Pathet Lao were improving until the latter refused to participate in the national elections held on Christmas Day 1955. By doing so, the Pathet Lao were protesting the government's refusal to extend the election's filing deadline and voting rights to women and college students.

The Pathet Lao were uncooperative in their own way. During talks with the RLG on reintegrating the provinces of Sam Neua and Phong Saly into the national system, they rejected the Vientiane government's proposal that half the members of administrations in the two provinces be appointed from the Pathet Lao, the other half from the RLG. The Pathet Lao insisted on building a parallel administration of their own in the provinces selected as temporary regrouping areas. There were other complaints that the Pathet Lao refused to surrender their prisoners of war and sent many young Laotians, some coerced, to Vietnam for revolutionary training. The 1954 Geneva peace agreement broke down and fighting resumed.

The Princes Seek Peace

In August 1956 Souvannaphouma traveled to Peking and Hanoi, seeking the neutrality of communist China and Vietnam before he ventured further into reconciliation talks with his brother Souphanouvong. A month earlier, representatives of the RLG and the Lao Buddhist Sangha had traveled to Bangkok to request Phetsarath's help in bringing his brothers and their supporters together to work for peace in Laos. When Phetsarath left his eleven-year exile to return to Vientiane, the three brothers met and another peace agreement was jointly declared on August 5, 1956.

Implementing the peace was another matter. Laotian officials in Vientiane already faced charges of corruption from a score of Lao newspapers. The United States, hoping to encourage rapid development, was granting substantial amounts of economic aid, but its effects on the economy were distorted by personal greed and foreign opportunists. One newspaper, Sinlatham ("Morality"), noted that large amounts of money (presumably recycled foreign aid funds) were leaking out of the country to private bank accounts abroad rather than being invested in Laos. Other problems cited were the increase in prostitution and the decline in public sanitation, consumer shortages, and the overwhelming power of Thai and Chinese businesses in Laos. Ironically, after the newspaper decried the lack of a May Day holiday for the country's workers, its editor and twenty-eight others were arrested as rebels on May 1, 1956.

The importance of American economic assistance was such that the threat of the U.S. stopping foreign aid to Laos if the Pathet Lao were integrated into the national government quickly threatened the princes' peace attempts. The U.S. ambassador to Laos later testified that he had "struggled for sixteen months to prevent a coalition". The Pathet Lao contributed to the tensions by insisting that Laos take Soviet bloc economic and technical aid. Despite such obstacles, by November 1957 Souvannaphouma and Souphanouvong had designed a *coalition government*.

The 1957 Vientiane Agreements

Under the princes' plan, the provinces of Sam Neua and Phong Saly were to be turned over to royal authority along the lines of the half/half formula previously rejected by the Pathet Lao. The Vientiane government was to take control of fifteen hundred Pathet Lao troops and all equipment, while the rest of the rebel soldiers were to be demobilized. Souphanouvong became the minister of Plans, Reconstruction, and Urbanism, a position that gave him control over foreign aid, which greatly disturbed American donors. Another Pathet Lao leader, Phoumi Vongvichit, was also appointed a minister in the coalition government.

National elections were held in May 1958 and the Neo Lao Hak Xat (NLHX) ("Laotian Patriotic Front"), a political party representing the Pathet Lao, won nine of twenty-one contested seats in the fifty-nine seat National Assembly. Souphanouvong, leader of the NLHX, won more votes than any other candidate in the country and was elected chairman of the National Assembly. The Peace Party won another four positions; the remaining eight seats were split between three anticommunist parties.

Prior to the elections, the United States had sponsored an intensive village aid program called "Operation Booster Shot". The American aid program allotted three million dollars for digging wells, improving irrigation dams, repairing roads and airfields, building hospitals, repairing temples and schools, and distributing free food and even shoes. However, in June 1958, after the tallied votes earned the NLHX a strong role in the national government, the U.S. suspended all of its aid, leaving Laos in a precarious economic position.

The Growth of Laos' Military

The Laotian military was rapidly gaining importance because it received the lion's share of U.S. assistance. During the late 1950s more than eighty percent of the annual $40 million in U.S. aid was directed to the Royal Lao Army. Laos' entire military budget was paid for by the U.S. To circumvent the legal restraints of the Geneva Accords, military aid took the guise of economic assistance. U.S. military advisors, dressed as civilians, operated out of the U.S. embassy's economic aid mission. The military's spending power soon led Laotian officers to seek greater political power. Military power in politics was common at this time; France, Thailand, and Burma were each under the rule of a "strongman."

In June 1958 a group of reformers led by ambitious young Lao military officers and joined by bureaucrats, diplomats, and students,, organized in Vientiane. Known as the CDIN (after its French name which means "Committee for the Defense of National Interests"), the dissenters urged a broad platform of changes. The anticommunist Young Ones, as they called themselves, called for reforms to eliminate graft, corruption, and nepotism; changes in the judicial system; increased discipline among the Buddhist clergy; and an end to discrimination based on social class. Critics say these good intentions were publicized to camouflage a power grab.

After a parliamentary vote of nonconfidence, Souvannaphouma resigned in July 1958 and was sent to France as ambassador. The coalition government with his brother, Prince Souphanouvong, had satisfied some of the goals of the Geneva Accords, but Laos' brief attempt at peace and neutrality was doomed.

The new national government led by Phoui Sananikone included members of the CDIN, many of whom were military men favored by the U.S. There were some minor reforms, such as creating a Department of Rural Affairs, but the gap between the lives of those in the city and those in the villages continued to grow. Although most of the Laotian population made their living from farming, only $1.9 million of the total $480.7 million in U.S. aid given to Laos from 1955-1963 was spent on agriculture.

Laos is Drawn into the Vietnamese Conflict

Relations between the governments in the northern and southern parts of Vietnam were faltering and hopes for reunification were dashed by the end of 1958. As the conflict escalated, more Viet Minh soldiers, spies, and supplies moved along the mountain paths, which crossed through Lao territory to avoid the demilitarized zone that divided Vietnam in half. The trip along the Ho Chi Minh trail, as the guerrilla route was later known, took two months of traveling through rough terrain in Laos to reach southern Vietnam:

> In all directions, range upon range of lofty mountain crests and saw-toothed ridges succeed one another. From the air, the ground appears matted by a never-ending carpet of green foliage. In the rain-drenched tropical forest of hardwoods laced with vines and creepers, absolutely nothing distinguishes the territory of Laos from that of North Vietnam.

By January 1959 the governments in Hanoi and Vientiane were trading accusations. The north Vietnamese accused Laotian Air Force planes of spying over Vietnamese territory, and the Laotians charged that north Vietnamese troops had invaded Lao border territories. After siding with the Vietnamese, Souphanouvong and the other NLHX legislators and top leaders were arrested and put in prison in July.

The Lao government was facing myriad problems. There was tension on the Lao-Chinese border after fourteen thousand Lao Sung refugees from China arrived in northwest Laos. Another internal threat was the some fifteen hundred Pathet Lao crack troops not yet integrated into the national army. Given an ultimatum by the Lao government in May 1959, one Pathet Lao battalion cooperated in merging with the Royal Lao Army. The other group, based on the Plain of Jars, disappeared overnight and headed toward the Vietnamese border.

The stage was set for renewed fighting between Pathet Lao and Royal Lao Government troops. Even before the 1957 peace agreement between the two sides, the Pathet Lao had prepared at least one secret base in each of the Laotian provinces. Although the bases appeared dormant during the years of the coalition government, by 1959 they had nearly doubled in size and spread west from the inhospitable mountain regions to within a day's march of Laos' biggest cities. The Pathet Lao were also careful to mix Lao Loum, Lao Theung, and Lao Sung soldiers in each unit, so that wherever the group went, they could make contact with local people.

Despite large quantities of American equipment, widespread corruption and low morale troubled the Royal Lao Army. According to one story, when fighting broke out in northern Laos in 1959, a commanding general of the government's army had to buy basketball shoes from Chinese shops in Vientiane because all the paratrooper boots for his soldiers had been stolen and sold on the black market. Also the government's armed forces consisted mainly of Lao Loum, most of whom lacked experience fighting in the jungles and mountains where the Pathet Lao dominated. Many Lao Loum soldiers considered themselves culturally superior to the ethnic minorities. Ignorant of the local languages and alienated from the minority cultures, they often repelled villagers with their prejudices instead of attracting essential local support.

Fighting began in Sam Neua in July 1959. One-third of the Pathet Lao soldiers who had been integrated into the Royal Lao Army deserted and rejoined the rebels. The Vientiane government accused the Viet Minh of providing "considerable indirect aid" to the Pathet Lao and refused Souphanouvong's offers to act as mediator between the Laotian forces.

The Sad End to an Era

When the king of Laos lay on his deathbed, many Lao saw it as a bad omen for the kingdom. After ruling for more than fifty-five years, King Sisavangvong passed the crown to his son, Crown Prince Savang Vathana, in late July 1959. The heavy monsoon rains made the situation in Laos appear even more dreary. In October the old king died in Luang Phrabang, an event preceded by the death of another famous member of Lao royalty, Prince Phetsarath.

Prince Phetsarath had hoped to build his country into a small, peaceful haven of neutrality, as he eloquently stated:

> The geography of Laos . . . makes the country open for aggression, making it necessary to proclaim neutrality first and to be humble rather than boastful. Why conduct oneself so as to goad others into testing their weapons in our villages? We should rather do good for all our neighbors so they will have compassion. . . . How many dozens of years will it take to build ourselves and to bring happiness to our people?

Instead the Laotian people suffered through the next decades as Laotian politics fell into chaos and the war in Vietnam spilled blood into neighboring lands.

Student Activities

A. Comprehension: Choose the correct answer.

1. Prior to contact with Europeans, Laotians traded with
a) China
b) Vietnam
c) Siam
d) all of the above

2. To take control of Laos, France had to compete with
a) China
b) Vietnam
c) Siam
d) all of the above

3. The French relied on indirect rule in Laos because of
a) the small number of French administrators
b) the ethnic diversity of Laos
c) the desire to protect Frenchmen from direct contact or conflict
d) all of the above

4. By 1943 Laos' three largest cities were populated mainly by
a) Laotians
b) Vietnamese
c) French
d) Chinese

5. The colonial government in Laos got most of its revenue from
a) the opium monopoly
b) trade tariffs
c) income taxes
d) business taxes

6. During WWII, France surrendered Champasak and Xayaburi to
a) Japan
b) the U.S.
c) Thailand
d) Cambodia

7. The Lao Issara was
a) the name of a Lao Theung revolt in southern Laos
b) the Lao independence movement that took power briefly in 1945
c) the name of the pro-French movement that fought against Japan
d) none of the above

8. Indochina refers to
a) China's border with India
b) Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam
c) all of mainland Southeast Asia
d) none of the above

9. The 1954 Geneva Accords called for the
a) end to foreign interference in the internal affairs of Laos
b) withdrawal of foreign troops from Laos, except for 5,000 French
c) integration of Pathet Lao troops into the Royal Lao Army
d) all of the above

10. Laos was drawn into the conflict in Indochina because
a) eastern Laos was strategic in the Vietnam War
b) Laotians wanted to become part of Vietnam
c) because of a prophecy by the monk Pho Sathou
d) because Laotians hated Americans

Matching: Match the name with the description.

1. Kommadam
2. Sisavangvong
3. Rochet
4. Phetsarath
5. Van Wusthoff
6. Batchai
7. Souphanouvong
8. Mouhot
9. Pavie
10. Souvannaphouma

a. Lao prince who became leader of the Pathet Lao
b. Lao prince who tried by peaceful means to make Laos a politically neutral country
c. Lao prince who modernized the Lao colonial bureaucracy and promoted independence
d. King of Luang Phrabang, whom the French made Laos' reigning monarch
e. Dutch trader, one of the first Europeans to visit Lan Xang
f. French diplomat who brought Laos under France's colonial domain
g. French explorer, the first European to visit Luang Phrabang
h. Lao Theung who led anticolonial revolts in southern Laos
i. Lao Sung leader who led an anti-tax revolt in 1919-1921
j. French colonial official who encouraged Lao nationalism

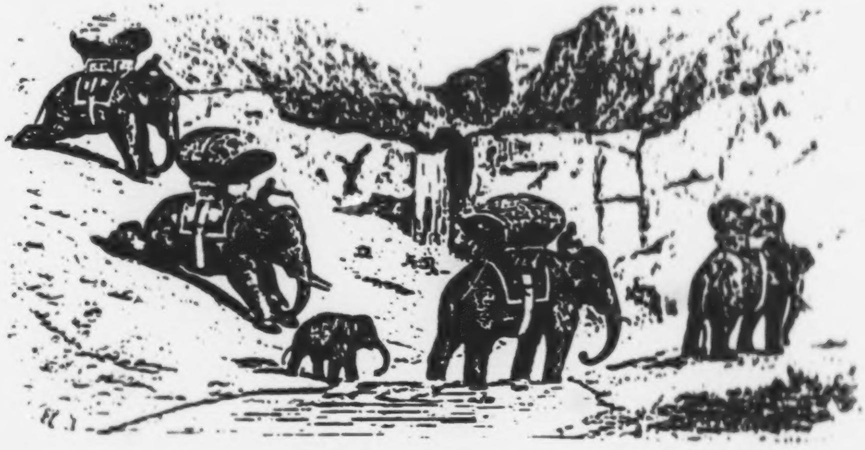
B. Class Discussion:

1. Why did the Europeans first come to Laos?
2. Why and how did they become a colonial power in Laos?
3. What events or movements led to Laotian independence?
4. How did the global "Cold War" affect Laos?
5. How would you describe the role the U.S. played in Laos' history?

C. Research: Compare the Europeans' early impressions of Laos and Laotians with early European impressions of North America. (The class can divide into groups, with group concentrating on the writings of different European authors and then presenting their research to the class.) How were the Europeans' impressions of foreign lands similar or different? Based on the European descriptions, would you rather have lived in Laos or in your state?

D. Time Line: Continue the time line that you began in the previous chapter, comparing the dates of major events in American history with Lao historical dates and events mentioned in this chapter. Be prepared to discuss why you think the dates and events that you chose are important.

E. Essay: In your opinion, what were the main effects of colonialism on Laos and Laotians? How did colonialism in Laos differ from colonialism in North America, i.e., motivations, methods, and outcomes?



CARAVAN OF ELEPHANTS CROSSING THE MOUNTAINS OF LAOS

War and Revolution

The Lao Military Takes Power

The Royal Lao government, headed by Phoui Sananikone, declared *martial law* in September 1959 and asked for United Nations intervention in Laos. The UN turned down the Lao government's request for an international peace keeping force but sent observers to inquire into the charges of north Vietnamese invasions into Laos. No captured Vietnamese troops were ever produced, but years later the Vietnamese officially admitted that their troops were fighting in Laos in 1959.

On the last day of 1959, the leading generals of the Lao Royal Army held a bloodless coup in Vientiane and took control. Lao generals, including Phoumi Nosavan, supported the coup because they feared the communist threat to Laos. The spending power of U.S. aid, along with soldiers from villages throughout the whole country, gave the military leaders confidence that they represented a credible national force for protecting and modernizing Laos.

Many foreign diplomats saw the prospect of a military regime in "neutral" Laos as the end of the Geneva accords. British and French ambassadors implored the new Lao king, Savang Vatthana, to intervene and name an interim civilian government until the April elections.

The rules were changed for the 1960 elections to put NLHX candidates at a disadvantage. A Lao politician and member of the CDIN, Sisouk Na Champassak, described the process:

> The electoral districts were revised to break up Pathet Lao zones of influence and prevent the movement from forming highly compact groups. The eligibility requirements for candidates were stiffened . . . election

> deposits were doubled, a minimum educational standard was required, either an elementary school certificate or a maha of third grade. . . . more than half the Pathet Lao leaders and propagandists had no schooling and so were automatically excluded from the race.

Despite the changes, the NLHX ran nine candidates.

The U.S. *Central Intelligence Agency* (CIA) was also accused of tampering with the election. An American Foreign Service officer claimed to have seen agents distributing bags of money in Savannakhet to buy votes.

The Pathet Lao Build Village Support

Anti-Pathet Lao candidates were swept into power on a landslide of votes. Yet, despite the appearance of government control, much of rural Laos was undergoing a slow, quiet process of change. The Pathet Lao were more concerned with winning the loyalties of villages rather than votes. They accomplished this in many places with a mixture of persuasion and coercion.

The key link between the village and the central government was the village headman, or pho ban ("father of the village"). The headman was chosen by the villagers. Higher levels of government were appointed by Vientiane. Sometimes the Pathet Lao eliminated village leaders who opposed them. A more subtle tactic was for young cadres from the village to seek office. The Pathet Lao also undermined respect for the traditional authorities by making the villages unsafe for government officials to visit and then starting rumors that government officials in Vientiane were keeping foreign aid instead of distributing it to villagers.

Persuasion also helped Souphanouvong and seven other NLHX politicians who were passing months in a Vientiane jail. While awaiting trial they cultivated the sympathy of their guards. On May 24, 1960, the prince and his colleagues escaped into a stormy tropical night accompanied by their guards. Prince Souphanouvong spent the next five months traveling on foot to Pathet Lao camps in each province, an odyssey that covered more than three hundred miles.

Captain Kong Le Mounts a Coup D'etat

Meanwhile there was discontent in the royal Lao military. While the entire cabinet was visiting Luang Phrabang to discuss the cremation of King

Sisavangvong, a young commander of the country's crack troops held his own coup d'etat. When the citizens of Vientiane woke up on the morning of August 8, 1960, they found Captain Kong Le and the Second Paratroop Battalion claiming civil and military power over Laos.

Kong Le was born in 1934 to a Lao Theung family in Savannakhet province. He was a short, shy man with a reputation as one of Laos' best field officers and an example of personal integrity in an era of widespread corruption. He first fought with the French against the Viet Minh, then trained with American military in the Philippines and later fought the Pathet Lao. He justified the coup as a way of bringing peace to Laos:

> During my period of military service, all Lao governments and the Royal Army have informed us that there were enemies outside Laos ready to enter and cause agitation within our country. But I and my friends, in our work together, have never seen such enemies coming to make trouble. We have only seen Lao killing Lao without cause.

Kong Le urged that Laos should take a truly neutral path and weaken ties with the American government. Laotian students were quick to rally to his cause and the streets of the capital city became crowded with anti-U.S. demonstrations. There was an appeal for Souvannaphouma to return as prime minister and reconcile all Laotians as he had attempted in 1957.

The prince accepted and formed a new government. On August 17 the paratroopers allowed bureaucrats to resume their administrative duties, but bribes were forbidden. Next the prince attempted to make peace with the ousted politicians and cabinet members, including the supporters of Phoumi Nosavan who had set up a "Counter Coup D'Etat Committee" based in Savannakhet. After negotiations, some of the top opponents were given new cabinet positions with less power.

As August ended, it seemed that peace in Laos was at hand, especially with the assurances of a new American ambassador that his country would be neutral in this Laotian affair. However, the Laotian military was still divided. Kong Le was unhappy with the return to power of "corrupt officials," and Phoumi Nosavan refused to return to Vientiane. For the next eighteen months Laos was ruled by two rival governments, each controlling separate territory with the help of different foreign supporters.

The Pathet Lao took advantage of the confusion in Vientiane by offering full support for the new government while expanding their own political networks and making military efforts to control more territory. In September Pathet Lao radio suggested that their troops should join those supporting the Vientiane government to fight against soldiers loyal to Phoumi Nosavan, who were receiving military supplies from Air America, a private charter company contracted to the CIA.

Foreign Involvement in Laos

While foreign military supplies flooded Laos, other supplies such as petroleum dried up, because of an unofficial economic blockade by Thailand. The Soviet Union helped to fill the shortages and set up an embassy in Vientiane in September. The Royal Lao Government also resumed talks with the Pathet Lao, to the displeasure of the American CIA and military advisers who backed Phoumi Nosavan.

The Royal Lao Government was receiving mixed signals from the U.S. The U.S. cut off its cash-grant to Laos just before peace talks began and a former American ambassador to Laos, who had opposed the prince's plans for building a coalition government in 1957, flew in from Washington to try to pressure the prince into allying with Phoumi Nosavan and breaking off from the Pathet Lao. Souvannaphouma compromised by allowing deliveries of U.S. military supplies, to be used by Phoumi Nosavan's soldiers to fight only the Pathet Lao, not Kong Le's troops. While American financial aid to Laos resumed, the Royal Lao Government negotiated for Soviet aid.

With American aid being sent to Phoumi Nosavan, other generals and soldiers began to support him. A delegation of National Assembly politicians traveled to his headquarters in Savannakhet but failed to persuade him to call off plans for an attack on Vientiane. Their return to the capital was met by an angry mob who denounced any attempts to negotiate with the rebels in Savannakhet.

The Battle of Vientiane

A bloody battle shook Vientiane in December. Heavily armed with modern American guns, mortars, and artillery, Kong Le's soldiers clashed with Phoumi Nosavan's troops in the streets, killing more than seven hundred people and wounding many others. After a last attempt to make peace, Souvannaphouma left Laos for exile in Cambodia, where he strongly criticized Americans meddling in Laotian affairs.

American bullets weren't the only ones killing Laotians. On December 10, a minister of the Vientiane government went to Hanoi, where he negotiated a formal alliance between Kong Le's men and the Pathet Lao in return for a Russian airlift of weapons and supplies. Soviet planes immediately began landing cannons and Vietnamese gun crews in Vientiane.

After seventy-six hours of fierce fighting Kong Le's paratroopers withdrew to the Plain of Jars, where they fought on, supplied by the Russian airlift from Vietnam. After a majority of the National Assembly representatives withdrew support for Souvannaphouma's cabinet, the Lao king entrusted Phoumi Nosavan and Boun Oum na Champassak with temporary control of the government.

Meanwhile the civil war in Laos continued. The Pathet Lao troops were assisted by "volunteers" from Vietnam. The communists advanced and Phoumi Nosavan's troops retreated, despite increased help from the U.S. Some four hundred American Special Forces soldiers, dressed in civilian clothes, were attached to Royal Lao Army units as trainers. The Royal Lao Army increased to more than forty thousand men, many of whom came from Hmong hill tribes.

The Hmong Army

The Hmong were known as ferocious fighters. Hmong irregular units, led by Vang Pao, were said to have caused many of the seven hundred or so Vietnamese casualties in Laos during the first half of 1961. However, some Hmong fought on the side of the Vietnamese and Pathet Lao. The Hmong had long been divided into two camps. The feud could be traced to the two prominent Hmong clans from Xiang Khuang province. They became enemies in the 1930s when a Lo daughter, who had married a Ly son, died after complaining of bad treatment from her husband. The dispute broadened during the Japanese occupation, when the French replaced a district officer from the Lo family with a French-educated member of the Ly clan. When the French struggled to regain power in Laos after World War II, Hmong supporters of Touby Ly Fong assisted French commandos in the jungle. Others followed Faydang, a son of the dismissed Lo official, and allied with the Lao Issara. Faydang later became a top Hmong leader in the Pathet Lao.

America's relationship with the Hmong began in 1959, when the hill tribes fought to retain control of mountaintops in Pathet Lao territory in northern Laos. In October 1960, Phoumi Nosavan negotiated the support of Touby Ly Fong's followers, reportedly promising an autonomous Hmong state in return for help fighting the Pathet Lao.

Supplied with American arms ferried into Laos by Air America, the anticommunist Hmong military leader Vang Pao had organized a plan to prepare for the civil war that erupted in 1961. Hmong from two hundred villages left their homes in Xiang Khuang and marched to seven mountains surrounding the Plain of Jars, poised to cut Pathet Lao supply routes. Many of the Lao Sung and Lao Theung refugees from the war starved or died from disease during the tragic exodus. The hungry Hmong, who had left their animals and crops in the field, were attracted to the mountain bases, where the men were organized into guerrilla units by American advisers and their families fed with food supplied by Air America flights.

Despite the brave fighting of the Hmong, the Royal Lao Army lost control of more territory during March 1961. By the end of the month, the Pathet Lao controlled parts of the provinces of Phong Saly, Sam Neua, Luang Phrabang, Xiang Khuang, Vientiane and Khammouan.

President Kennedy and the Laos Crisis of 1961

The administration of the newly-elected president John F. Kennedy inherited the Laos crisis in January 1961. Kennedy considered sending American troops to fight in the jungles of Laos but decided that, because of conflicts in Berlin and other places, the necessary troops and supplies could not be spared for a major effort. Instead he decided to back a British-Soviet proposal for a cease-fire followed by another international conference on Laos. In a television speech, President Kennedy appealed for popular support:

> My fellow Americans, Laos is far away from America, but the world is small. Its two million people live in a country three times the size of Austria. The security of all Southeast Asia will be endangered if Laos loses its neutral

> independence. Its own safety runs with the safety of us all- in real neutrality observed by all.

Although he regularly mispronounced the name of the Southeast Asian country, reportedly because he couldn't bear to solicit support for a country whose name sounded like "louse," Kennedy handled other aspects of the crisis well. He calmly gave orders to put American troops and ships on alert and quietly informed the Soviet Union of such military preparations. With firm resolve, the U.S. government waited to see if the Soviets could convince the Democratic Republic of Vietnam to agree to a cease-fire and an international peace conference. Eventually the superpowers' efforts to organize talks on a neutral Laos were successful.

The Second Geneva Conference on Laos

The cease-fire in Laos officially began on May 3, but lacked specific details on troop movements or control of territory. The government of Laos, along with all of the countries that had attended the 1954 conference, as well as Burma, Thailand, and the three ICC countries (Canada, India, and Poland), went to Geneva. When the talks convened on May 16, the three Lao delegations representing the Pathet Lao, the Vientiane government controlled by Phoumi Nosavan, and the rival government of Souvannaphouma held equal status. The talks were still going on a year later when the Royal Lao Army fought and then fled from Pathet Lao and Vietnamese forces in the northwest Laotian province of Nam Tha. After this military failure, Phoumi Nosavan at last accepted the establishment of a coalition government.

On June 23 the countries attending the Geneva conference signed an agreement to respect a neutral Laos. The Soviet Union appeared keen to defuse tensions in Laos. The Soviets halted airlifts to Laos and gave the planes and support to the new government in Vientiane, headed by Souvannaphouma. Earlier the Soviet government had criticized Vietnamese policy in Laos, noting that Soviet aid was not reaching the neutralists or even the Pathet Lao but was being sent further south to build roads from Laos into southern Vietnam in preparation for fighting there.

The United States also turned its attention from Laos to southern Vietnam, confident that the Soviets would honor their pledge to keep Laos neutral. During Souvannaphouma's visit to Washington, he was told that the U.S. would assure peace in Laos by maintaining a strong military presence in neighboring countries, meaning Thailand and southern Vietnam. The Americans warned that Vietnamese guerrillas should not seek sanctuary or travel through Laos.

Foreign Interference in Laos Continues

The Vietnamese communists continued fighting battles as if Indochina were a chessboard, ignoring national borders on the grounds of international revolutionary unity. In August 1962, U.S. reconnaissance planes observed large truck convoys strengthening the Vietnamese military presence in Laos, contrary to the Genèva ruling against the "introduction of foreign regular and irregular troops, foreign paramilitary formations, and foreign military personnel in Laos." The Geneva agreement also required the withdrawal of foreign military personnel from Laos. The U.S. pulled out its 666 advisers, each counted by the ICC, while only forty of the suspected ten thousand foreign Vietnamese soldiers were observed leaving.

The U.S. also circumvented the Geneva agreement. Retired military men returned to work in civilian clothes at the U.S. embassy's economic aid mission. U.S. military reconnaissance flights and delivery of supplies continued. In August 1962 the Pathet Lao protested Air America flights, which sustained the Hmong soldiers and their families inside Pathet Lao dominated territory. Justified by the substantial Vietnamese forces still in Laos, American involvement increased. The renewed U.S. role was approved by Souvannaphouma but never voted on by the coalition. The NLHX would have vetoed it.

Table 5. U.S. FOREIGN AID TO LAOS, 1955-1963 (in millions of dollars)

Fiscal Year	Devpmt. Grants	Budget Support	Military Equip.	Total
1955	$ —	$ 40.9	$ —	$ 40.9
1956	1.0	47.3	24.4	75.7
1957	1.5	42.9	4.3	48.7
1958	1.7	29.8	5.4	36.9
1959	1.7	23.4	7.5	32.6
1960	1.2	40.9	13.4	55.5
1961	1.4	29.1	33.4	63.9
1962	-0.6	27.5	37.1	64.0
1963	—	38.5	24.0	62.5
TOTAL	7.9	320.3	152.5	480.7

The Vietnamese also prepared for war during the peace in Laos. With the Lao government's approval, during 1962 the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN) improved four major roads over the Annamite mountains to Laos, readying them for heavy-duty traffic. The Chinese also built roads linking the northern Lao provinces of Phong Saly and Nam Tha with southern China.

The Coalition Government Falls Apart

By November 1962 Kong Le's neutralist soldiers on the Plain of Jars had divided into factions supporting either the Pathet Lao or Royal Lao Government forces. After the coalition government's foreign minister, a neutralist, was assassinated in April 1963, Souphanouvong and other NLHX members of the government left Vientiane for a safer Pathet Lao controlled area on the Plain of Jars.

A tense stalemate between the Pathet Lao and the Royal Lao Army was aggravated by the continued resupply of Hmong irregulars, who fought communist troops. During the summer of 1963, Air America was delivering a total of forty tons of supplies per day during its flights into Laos. For the first time since 1960, the Americans resumed supplying weapons and ammunition to Kong Le's loyal troops, who had turned from fighting the Hmong to battling the Pathet Lao on the Plain of Jars. There were new reports of Vietnamese troops arriving to back up the Pathet Lao in the battles.

The civil war was ruining rural Laos. There were rice shortages because farmers had become soldiers, and the Pathet Lao were taking rice from southern Laos to stock caches in the eastern mountains. Rampant inflation was eroding the stability of the faltering government. By 1963 Air America was landing sacks of rice in towns along the Mekong.

After visiting Hanoi and Peking, and continuing inconclusive talks with the two other factions in April, Souvannaphouma declared he would resign from the coalition government. Within days, two right-wing generals staged a coup and arrested the prince, but the coup collapsed when the U.S. did not support it. Souvannaphouma was reinstated but the coalition government was a shambles.

The Air War in Laos Begins

The air war over Laos heated up along with the weather at the end of April 1964. The Pathet Lao attacked and decimated Hmong settlements and then chased Kong Le's troops from the Plain of Jars. After some American reconnaissance planes flying low over Laos were shot at, the Royal Lao Government agreed to let the U.S. use armed jets, based on ships off the coast of Vietnam, as escorts. Some of the jets were shot down, and in retaliation American fighter-bombers fired rockets at the Pathet Lao.

When Souvannaphouma complained about the U.S. attacks, the American planes returned to flying only reconnaissance missions. Royal Lao Air Force planes, some flown by Thai pilots, raided the Pathet Lao headquarters on the Plain of Jars.

The air war in Vietnam, which had been approved by President Lyndon B. Johnson, spilled over into Laos. In October 1964 American planes joined the Royal Lao Air Force in bombing Laos. On December 14 the Americans undertook their own air campaign to bomb the Ho Chi Minh trail in southern Laos. Over the years, the U.S. would drop more than two million tons of bombs on Laos, close to the total amount dropped by U.S. aircraft during World War II. Laos' authorities today claim that three million tons were dropped, or one ton per Laotian.

Table 6. U.S. BOMBS DROPPED ON INDOCHINA (thousands of tons)

Year	S. Vietnam	N. Vietnam	Laos (northern)	HCM Trail (Laos)	Cambodia	Total
1965	218	63	10	23	—	314
1966	302	136	11	63	—	512
1967	598	226	19	91	—	934
1968	1,059	180	22	171	—	1,432
1969	957	—	189	240	—	1,386
1970	511	3	128	266	67	975
1971	238	6	115	296	109	764
Total	**3,883**	**614**	**494**	**1,150**	**176**	**6,317**

The Ho Chi Minh Trail

American bombing in Laos focused on the Ho Chi Minh trail, which had been enlarged from bicycle trails to roads suitable for truck and tank convoys. The U.S. military believed that severing the Vietnamese supply route through Laos was vital to winning the war in southern Vietnam. The bombing and secrecy of America's involvement in Laos, however, later turned American public opinion against the war.

The Ho Chi Minh trail became a technological obsession for American military experts. As early as 1966 they recommended building an "electronic barrier" to discourage use of the trail through Laos. All kinds of devices were dropped to track enemy movements. There were sound and seismic monitors, infrared sensors, and even urine sniffers. Data was relayed around the clock to planes circling overhead that sent the signals to computers at an American military base in Thailand. A huge computer bank then analyzed the information. If enough data existed to indicate a target moving down the Ho Chi Minh trail, planes or helicopters were dispatched to destroy it.

Most of the activity on the Ho Chi Minh trail took place at night, so it was difficult for planes flying over to assess damage. The enemy also had many tricks, such as playing tape recordings of crickets and jungle noises near sensors to conceal actual truck convoys. One current Lao general recalls lighting fires in order to lure American bombers into clearing a path through the dense jungle. It is estimated that twenty percent or less of the cargo transported down the Ho Chi Minh trail was destroyed by the frequent bombing.

Bombing in Laos Escalates

Survivors described four phases of the bombing in Laos. During the first, which lasted until October 1966, most of the bombs were dropped from Royal Lao Air Force propeller planes onto forests. In the next phase, lasting until 1968, American jets flew through the skies over Laos to bomb villages and towns. By 1968 American jets outnumbered Laotian planes, and civilian areas were bombed frequently while the forests were ignored. Many Laotians left their homes, seeking safety in holes in the ground or mountain caves, coming out only at night to farm.

When the newly elected U.S. president, Richard Nixon, claimed a bombing halt over northern Vietnam in 1969, those bombs were dropped on Laos instead. One American explained that "(w)e couldn't just let the planes rust." Soon nearly three hundred sorties a day were dropping bombs on northern Laos and the Plain of Jars. Refugees claimed that as the bombing increased, so did support for the Pathet Lao, which now called itself the Lao People's Liberation Army (LPLA).

The Ground War Grinds On

The escalation of U.S. bombing matched increases in the number of Vietnamese troops in Laos. In 1968 an estimated forty thousand communist Vietnamese soldiers were in Laos, mostly working on the Ho Chi Minh trail. Estimates in 1970 reached as high as sixty-seven thousand. The communist Vietnamese were not the only foreigners fighting in Laos. In addition to a few hundred Americans who worked for Air America, after 1969 more and more Thai mercenary troops were imported to fight on the side of the Royal Lao Army.

The ground war in Laos followed the weather. Fresh Vietnamese troops would cross into Laos from northern Vietnam at the start of the dry season and regain territory they had abandoned during the previous rainy season. The monsoon rains made fighting so difficult that rainy season offensives were rare. One exception was Vang Pao's recapture of the Plain of Jars in 1969.

Hmong warriors, supervised by the CIA and supplied by Air America, suffered increasingly heavy casualties as the war raged on. Besides helping to evacuate civilians, Vang Pao's commando units spied on and sabotaged the enemy, mostly in northeastern Laos. Despite their brave fighting, the Hmong population was devastated. An elderly American refugee aid worker, Edgar "Pop" Buell, described the effects of attrition on Vang Pao's Hmong troops.

> A short time ago we rounded up 300 fresh recruits. Thirty percent were 14 years old or less, and 10 of them were only 10 years old. Another 30% were 15 or 16. The remaining 40% were 35 or over. Where were the ones between? I'll tell you- they're all dead . . . and in a few weeks 90% of (the new recruits) will be dead.

The other casualties of war were some seven hundred thousand refugees, almost 25% of Laos' total population, who sought shelter in camps near Vientiane or provincial capitals. A Laotian proverb wisely warns of how civilians suffer in war: "When the buffalo fight, it is the grass that suffers."

In 1970 the war in Laos got a lot of negative publicity in American newspapers. President Nixon responded in March 1970 with a statement on American policy and actions in Laos. He emphasized that the U.S. had no ground troops in Laos, but air strikes were needed to counter the Vietnamese communist threat:

> Our goal in Laos has been and continues to be to reduce American involvement and not to increase it, to bring peace in accordance with the 1962 Accords and not to prolong the war. That is the picture of our current aid to Laos. It is limited. It is requested. It is supportive and defensive. It continues the purposes and operations of two previous administrations. It has been necessary to protect American lives in Vietnam and to preserve a precarious but important balance in Laos.

Battle in Southern Laos: Lam Son 719

In February 1971 anticommunist troops from southern Vietnam, supported by U.S. aircraft and troops, entered southern Laos near Tchepone to try to block the Ho Chi Minh trail. The Royal Laotian government was not asked to approve or involve Laotian troops in the battle known as Lam Son 719. After forty-five days and heavy losses, the South Vietnamese and American troops retreated to southern Vietnam.

In June 1971 Souphanouvong and the NLHX proposed peace and called for the end of U.S. bombing and a cease-fire as a prelude to reconciliation talks. Laotians were edging towards peace, partly as a consequence of cease-fire talks between the U.S. and the Vietnamese. Negotiations between the NLHX and the Royal Lao Government opened in October 1972.

Henry Kissinger, the National Security Advisers to President Nixon, and Le Duc Tho, a Vietnamese Politburo member, discussed the withdrawal of foreign troops from Laos in the Paris Agreement signed in January 1973. The Vietnamese communists were eager for a cease-fire in Laos. Ending American bombing of the Ho Chi Minh trail would free up Vietnamese troops to fight elsewhere. Vietnamese troops would remain in Laos for many more years.

The Last Cease-fire

Kissinger had come to Vientiane in February to tell the Royal Lao Government that because U.S. aid was ending soon, they should negotiate a cease-fire. The final cease-fire in the Laotian war went into effect on February 21, 1973. During the negotiations, the NLHX were confident of a much stronger bargaining position than they had in the Geneva peace talks of 1954 and 1962. Kaysone Phomvihane, one of top NLHX leaders later recalled,

> By the time the third coalition was formed, our authority and political positions were considerably stronger than before; we possessed greater military power, and had liberated regions taking 80% of the country's territory and over 50% of its population.

In contrast to the previous coalition governments, which were tripartite, this time the NLHX insisted on splitting power equally between their party and the "Vientiane Party." No neutralist faction was recognized and the NLHX considered anyone who didn't support them as right-wing opponents.

Until a new government was established, the NLHX and the Vientiane faction would each continue administrating the areas under their military control. Vientiane and Luang Phrabang were two important exceptions to the civil arrangements because Pathet Lao troops were supposed to set up an integrated security force with the Vientiane regime's soldiers in the national and the royal capitals.

In April 1974 Souphanouvong arrived in Vientiane to a folk hero's welcome and Souvannaphouma's brotherly embrace. A few days later, a new legislative body and a new government were set up. The government was crippled from the start because every minister had a vice minister from the opposite side with veto powers over decisions. Very little was accomplished within the coalition framework while the NLHX put the finishing touches on the administrative and political structure they would soon bring to power.

After the U.S. signaled its withdrawal from Laos by stopping reconnaissance flights over Laos in June 1974 and Souvannaphouma suffered a heart attack in July, the stage was set for the dramatic finale to the kingdom of Laos. In late March 1975, as troops from northern Vietnam launched their final successful offensive in southern Vietnam, the Pathet Lao clashed with

Hmong forces commanded by Vang Pao, eventually driving the hill tribe troops off the Plain of Jars.

Souvannaphouma ordered the Hmong to defend themselves but forbade air strikes against the Pathet Lao. The Hmong army, by now relying on children, lacked reinforcements, ammunition and supplies but not courage in their efforts to hold their territory. When their defenses collapsed, Vang Pao and other top leaders were secretly evacuated to Thailand on May 14. The Pathet Lao pursued the remaining Hmong unmercifully. Some of the suffering Hmong fled south seeking refuge across the Mekong river in Thailand. Many died along the way or were shot by the Thai as they crossed the river but about twenty-five thousand survived. About sixty thousand others went east, planning to regroup at the mountain called Phu Bia, on the southern edge of the Plain of Jars.

In Vientiane, strikes and street demonstrations were frequent. Various groups, such as students and laborers, orchestrated public protests against the royal army and police, inflation, foreign aid, corruption, and other concerns. When Lao demonstrators occupied the *United States Agency for International Development* (USAID) headquarters in Vientiane, the aid program was shut down. Fearing violence when the civil unrest peaked in May 1975, various anticommunist ministers and military men abandoned the country and went to Thailand. On August 23 an NLHX revolutionary committee took control of Vientiane's municipal government, backed up by newly arrived LPLA troops.

In other towns throughout the country, government offices not already administered by the NLHX were taken over by "people's revolutionary committees." Pathet Lao troops entered the cities along the Mekong on the premise of providing security. Military and civilian officials associated with the former Vientiane regime who did not flee to Thailand were "invited to meetings" and then sent to prison camps for *reeducation*.

At a November 26 rally celebrating recent local and provincial elections, crowds yelled for the replacement of the "feudalist, imperialist" regime. Two days later, King Savang Vatthana, Laos' last monarch, was asked to abdicate. The demise of the kingdom of Laos was not made public until a week later, after a secret meeting of 264 NLHX supporters convened in the former American high school auditorium. The new era of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR) was born.

The Communist Party in Laos

The new government, which assumed complete power in December 1975, proclaimed the victory of *Marxist-Leninism*. With Vietnamese military assistance and the support of rural people alienated by the Royal Lao government, the revolution's leaders had successfully persevered. A former president and communist leader of Laos, Kaysone Phomvihane, recalled:

> although in the course of the revolution we had to change our tactics depending on the respective stages of the struggle, to utilize its different forms and methods, and to show flexibility, the fundamental principle of our Party was always that of violent revolution and an offensive strategy.

The earliest roots of the revolution in Laos were nurtured by the Indochina Communist Party, established in 1930. By 1934 there were secret cells in Laos but all members were Vietnamese. By the following year only two Lao had joined the party. Frequent arrests by the colonial secret police discouraged membership.

In October 1945 the Lao Issara gave approval to the ICP-directed Viet Minh to fight in Laos, a desperate measure to retain Lao independence from the French. Ironically, Laotian independence has been jeopardized, to greater or lesser degrees, ever since. When Souphanouvong broke with the Lao Issara exiles in 1949, he promised cooperation with resistance movements in neighboring countries (the Viet Minh) and a "truly democratic" government. The ICP stepped up efforts to recruit in Laos and relaxed membership criteria so revolutionary ardor and loyalty took priority over knowledge of communist doctrines.

When the ICP dissolved in 1951, Laos got its own secret communist party, known as the Phak Pasason Lao ("Lao People's Party"), which remained under the supervision of the Vietnamese Workers' Party. Shortly after, the Lao rebels became known as the Pathet Lao and established their resistance government in Sam Neua. A Lao communist described the Lao revolutionary base as

> a vast, wide operational base full of obstacles, a base where paddy, forest products, and soil resources are abundant, a base which borders the free zone of the friendly country of Vietnam. In this place we will build our armed forces, establish our territory and reinforce our front.

The Lao People's Party was officially founded in a bamboo building in Sam Neua in 1955, with a membership of three hundred. Its existence continued to be a secret while its members took leadership roles in the new political organization called the Neo Lao Hak Xat which was formed from the Neo Lao Issara/Pathet Lao in 1956. The purpose of the NLHX was to get popular support by appealing to Laotian nationalism rather than Marxist ideology. The NLHX front, presided over by Souphanouvong, propagandized slogans demanding a "peaceful, independent, neutral, democratic, unified and prosperous Laos." Under the umbrella of the NLHX, various interest groups such as a Youth Union, Women's Union, Farmers' Association, Buddhist Association, Christian Association, tribal associations, and trade unions were mobilized to support the revolutionaries. Many of these same organizations are still working in Laos today. Based on such support, the NLHX could claim that they were the legitimate representatives of the Laotian people when they chose to participate in elections, coalition governments, and international diplomacy.

In 1972 the Lao revolutionaries again changed the party's name, this time to the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP), the ruling party's name today. The changes were kept secret, however, until September 1975.

Government of the Lao People's Democratic Republic

After the change in government in 1975, Laos' new leaders threw out the former political system, but it took 16 years before they adopted a new national constitution. In the meantime, the country was ruled by an elite politburo comprised of disciplined, dedicated communists whose political loyalties had been shaped by Vietnamese family ties and youthful military experiences. In effect the politburo ruled through the LPRP by political decree rather than by law. The communist party elite held supreme power to decide policy, and it was up to communist party cadres to implement changes at the local level. The central government's administrative structure has never really controlled the rural areas of Laos, so the new government's policies met with mixed results.

Economic Policy

The government's biggest policy changes concerned the national economy. The economic situation was bleak because of the destruction wrought by a long and bitter war. The cities were scenes of extreme contrasts. Refugees from the combat areas, who had escaped with only the clothes upon their backs, mixed with those who became rich during the war years. Rural regions such as the Plain of Jars, once an agricultural oasis, were badly damaged by the fighting and bombing.

The first task for the new government was to resettle people in the rural areas and encourage them to resume farming so that the country could feed itself. The effort was complicated by the dangers of unexploded ammunition in the fields, and the scarcity of animals to pull the plows. Many oxen and buffalo were killed and eaten during the war. Fortunately the monsoon rains were heavy during 1975 and farmers harvested plenty of rice.

The dream of peacetime abundance did not last long. To control hoarding and inflation, the government forbade private trading in rice and demanded farmers sell their surplus rice to the government at a price set by the government. The government also tried to prohibit hai farming, which was the hill tribes' livelihood. All farmers were subject to a new national tax on what they produced. The new government economic policies, coinciding with dry weather in 1976 and 1977, spelled disaster for agricultural production. Life became more difficult in the cities because of food shortages. City people and government offices were ordered to grow their own vegetables in neighborhood plots.

After the war, the government began resettling people in villages that had been destroyed and encouraged them to form agricultural *cooperatives*. In the spring of 1978, the government decided that agricultural cooperatives should be a national priority to increase food production and educate people in the new socialist system.

Laotians traditionally help each other during busy times of the year, such as harvest time. There was no tradition of communal ownership except perhaps regarding the village temple or school. Under the new policy of cooperatives, which pooled land, many farmers lost their motivation to work hard. Many were upset that the fruits of their labor had to be sold to the state; they would have preferred giving it to the monks, or making merit by hosting parties or participating in religious festivals. Some farmers avoided cooperating by smuggling or sabotage. The government made a major error in 1976 when it did not organize the traditional rocket festival that invokes abundant rains. Many farmers blamed the subsequent drought on the government's negligence.

Other common complaints were mandatory labor required by the government, increased government interference in the independent rural communities, and the military draft for young men. Unfortunately for Laos, many farmers became so disillusioned with the new system that they crossed the river to Thailand and became refugees.

Refugees and Reeducation Camps

In addition to farmers, many of the country's engineers, teachers, doctors, and managers "voted with their feet" after the government changed. Forty-eight thousand of the former royal government's One hundred twenty thousand civil servants fled to Thailand. One official, who had served the king of Laos, described crossing the Mekong: "It was like leaving a house on fire. There was no time to plan and you couldn't take anything along or you would attract suspicion." By 1989 more than 400,000 Laotians had left their homeland.

Former royal government officials who did not leave Laos suffered for their faith in the new regime. Thirty thousand went to prison, and forty thousand were sent to reeducation camps by the beginning of 1976. Those suspected of association with the old regime or opposition to the new government were arrested and sent away without trial. Many political prisoners spent years in prison camps and complained of meager food, harsh conditions, exhausting physical labor, and boring lectures on politics. Some were allowed to have family members visit or join them while they labored as farmers, loggers, or construction workers. A top Laotian communist leader described the purpose of the reeducation camps, known as "seminars," in 1977:

> Why are people attending seminars? They are doing so to study new things . . . Those power bosses who never worked with their hands must learn to do so because under the socialist system everyone must engage in both mental and physical labor.

Most of the political prisoners suffered from malnutrition and serious illnesses such as malaria. Many, including the former king of Laos, died in reeducation camps. By 1980 some were being released, rehabilitated, and allowed to resume working for the government because of the extreme shortage of personnel.

The Special Relationship with Vietnam

Because of the scarcity of technical experts and the precedent of relying on Vietnamese during the war years, the new Lao government increased dependence on Vietnam and Vietnamese cadres in the postwar years. In July 1977 the two socialist neighbors signed a twenty-five-year treaty of friendship and cooperation. The Vietnamese provided as many as six thousand civilian advisers to work in Laos, of which a thousand were attached to different Laotian government ministries, except the ministries of Foreign Affairs, Justice, and the Interior. Critics of the new regime complained that Vietnamese advisers were taking charge of Laotian destiny. The largest number of Vietnamese were the fifty to sixty thousand military troops, many of whom were stationed on Laos' southern border with Cambodia. These Vietnamese troops in Laos invaded Cambodia in January 1979 when the Vietnamese helped to overthrow the Khmer Rouge government in Cambodia. According to Laotian officials, most of these Vietnamese have since withdrawn from Laos.

War with the Hmong

The anticommunist Hmong were briefly ignored by the new Laotian government, but in 1977 Vietnamese and Laotian government troops, supported by Soviet MIG airplanes and long-range artillery, surrounded and attacked Phu Bia, the mountain stronghold of the anticommunist Hmong. The ragged Hmong guerrillas managed to defend themselves until new, more deadly weapons were introduced. Hmong refugees reported suffering from napalm and poison dropped from the sky, but whether the "yellow rain" was a kind of chemical weapon or pollen is still being disputed. It is estimated that fifty thousand Hmong died in the Phu Bia region during 1975-1978. Crops were destroyed and many of the Hmong, devastated by war and hunger, began the long trek to Thailand. One young survivor described his experience:

> (on Phu Bia) we were able to plant a little rice and corn, and we still had a few clothes to use. Then in 1978, the communists took over the big mountain . . . We had no place to hide and live. We divided all the people into small groups and went different ways to Thailand . . . We did not know the way to get to Thailand, and we did not have a map. Even the weather seemed against us . . . sometimes we lived in caves and had nothing to eat . . . After one month of walking everybody was getting very skinny and our faces were turning yellow.

Those who escaped often died or were captured along the way; only twenty-five hundred of the original group of eight thousand Hmong survived to reach a Thai refugee camp in December 1977. By late 1979 about three thousand Hmong were arriving in Thailand from Laos each month. Many of these were later resettled in the United States.

Ethnic Minorities in the Lao PDR

Other ethnic minorities had a history of cooperation with the Laotian communists. Prior to 1975, the LPRP mainly consisted of minority members; roughly sixty percent were Lao Theung, thirty-six percent Lao Loum, and four percent Lao Sung. However, upon taking power in 1975, the new regime tried recruiting more members from among the lowland Lao to keep this group dominant. By 1991 there was still only one ethnic minority member in the Laotian politburo, the top decision-maker in Laos.

To integrate the many different ethnic groups of Laos into a united country, one in which a citizen's patriotism is stronger than his or her loyalty to an ethnic group or region, remains a major challenge. The issue of ethnic affairs is important for the government because many minorities live in border regions vital to the strategic defense of Laos. One way the government has approached this problem of building nationalism in Laos is to weaken the autonomy of those groups with a strong tradition of independence, such as the Hmong. Many of the Hmong who remain in Laos have been resettled at lower altitudes, where the government can better control them.

In its early years, the government criticized the minority groups' "superstitious" beliefs and their sacrifices of draft animals to honor spirits, but minority discontent soon led to a more tolerant approach by the government. By respecting cultural traditions and providing social services such as education and healthcare as far as its limited resources can afford, the national government has gained support from the ethnic minorities of Laos.

One means of unifying the diverse country is through the national education system. The role of minorities in Laos was ignored by previous governments; it is now emphasized in the school system. Students learn history and activities that share knowledge about minority cultures. The school curriculum frequently reiterates the importance of ethnic diversity in Laos. All education is in the Lao language, however, even when a written form of the minority language exists. The national radio does broadcast programs in minority languages.

Cultural Policies in the Lao PDR

The new government immediately tried to build a new socialist culture in Laos. In April 1976 those judged to be decadent- "drug addicts, prostitutes, 'hippies', gamblers"- were sent to reeducation camps. Rock music and pornography were banned. The government considered jeans, cosmetics, and western dancing as inappropriate to modern Lao socialist culture, as were the animal sacrifices and magic performed by ethnic minorities.

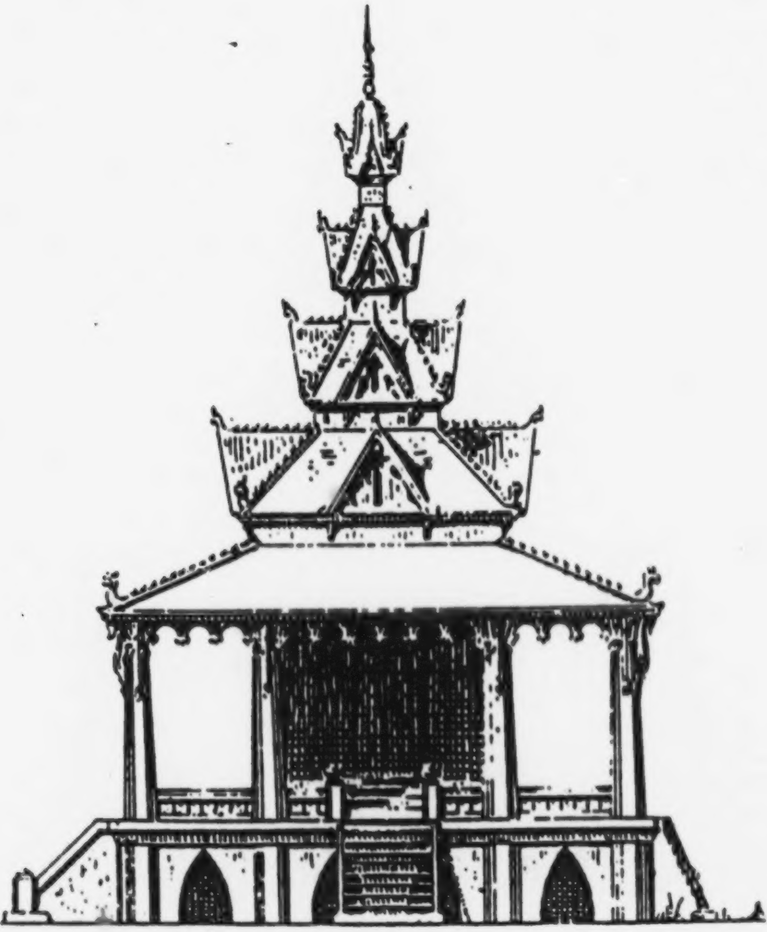
The next step was to control traditional culture. The former king did not last long in his career as counselor to the new government. In 1977 he was arrested and sent away to a reeducation camp in Sam Neua, where he was reported to have died. Prince Souvannaphouma was also named an honorary adviser, and he fared better, dying peacefully at home in 1984.

Besides neutralizing the traditional royal leaders, the government challenged the Buddhist sangha. In Laos there were about eight hundred temples and fifteen thousand Buddhist monks and novices in 1975. The Pathet Lao had won the support of some Buddhist monks by emphasizing socialism and Buddhism's shared common values, such as equality and liberation.

After 1975 the new government took strong measures to control religion. The sangha was subjected to new regulations, restrictions, and revised religious texts. The LPRP assumed the power of appointing religious leaders to the Lao United Buddhist Association, a new organization that unified the two main sects.

The teaching of religion and Buddhist morality in primary schools ended. Monks were told to grow their own food instead of relying on donations. Citizens were discouraged from attending religious festivals. When the public refused to give up Buddhism, the government relaxed its policy and created an active although changed place for religion in the new socialist order.

The monks were given a role in the government's campaign to teach adults to read and write the Lao language in villages where there were no schools and in schools where there were no teachers. Monks also helped to promote public health and healing using herbal and western medicines. To prepare monks for their new tasks, they attended government courses in political education and learned to work within the political structure and the goals set by the LPRP.



Social Services in the Lao PDR

Among the goals of the new government were primary education for every child, literacy for all adults, and technical training for as many as possible. Achieving these goals was not easy because of the lack of resources and the exodus of many Lao teachers to Thailand. Yet education remained a top priority for the new government. Primary schools were built in isolated areas, but their supplies were minimal and they were often staffed with teachers who had little education. Many adults learned to read, but, lacking books and newspapers in the small rural villages, they quickly forgot how to use their new literacy skills.

The new government also tried to win popular support by helping people lead healthier lives. In addition to a campaign for mass education in preventative hygiene and nutrition, there were efforts to control diseases such as malaria and tuberculosis and intestinal problems and parasites. The new government also tried to improve basic health by building rudimentary clinics and clean water systems in as many places as possible. According to the new government, in 1976 only one percent of Lao villages had clean water. By 1985 eighteen percent had a water system to provide good water for drinking and washing.

How could Laos pay for these long-term investments in social welfare when the country was barely able to feed itself? Laos turned to the United Nations agencies, Vietnam, the Soviet Union, and countries in Eastern Europe to fund development projects in Laos.

Foreign Aid

Foreign aid donors have played just as important a role in Laos' economy as they did prior to 1975. The United States previously supplied almost all of Laos' foreign aid. After 1975 the Soviet Union became the most generous donor by sponsoring the construction of airports, a town, a telecommunications system and earth satellite station, electrical power lines, roads and bridges, and brick and cement factories. The People's Republic of China, which used to help Laos build roads, suspended aid to Laos in late 1978 when Laos backed Vietnam in opposing the Peking-backed Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia.

Vietnam helped develop irrigation and exploitation of forestry and mineral resources in Laos. It also financed the purchase of food, medicine, and consumer goods from Vietnam. Hungary funded irrigation and chicken-farming projects and rebuilt bridges blown up during the war. East Germany gave a printing plant and encouraged bicycle-repair and shoe-repair cooperatives. Czechoslovakia participated in bridge building, forestry, and sapphire mining. Romania promised to build a wood-processing plant. Even Mongolia built a two-hundred-bed hospital and a sheep-breeding station, as well as supplied food, shoes, and clothing. Many Lao students also received scholarships to study in East Bloc countries.

Sweden, one of the first European donors after 1975, gave equipment for farming, forestry, and irrigation projects, while Japan funded road-building, irrigation, and a pharmaceutical plant. In 1977 and 1978 the U.S. gave food aid to help make up Laos' shortfall in agricultural production. Burma gave rice and seed, and India provided cloth and thread for weaving. International development agencies such as the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank have loaned money for the development of hydroelectric power, agriculture, education and rural projects.

The New Economic Policy

After dismal rice harvests and poor economic performance, in late 1979 the Lao government looked for alternatives to the communist *command economy* for developing Laos. The pressure for economic changes was at least twofold. On the one hand, the government needed to encourage economic growth to keep the support of Laotian citizens, who were discouraged with a government that had not helped them to improve their lives quickly enough. Secondly, the Lao government also had to modify its economic policy to attract foreign aid money, especially from important international donors like the World Bank. In turn, the foreign donors expected Laos to open up to foreign private investment.

Agricultural collectivization policies had created insecurity, driving peasants to produce just enough for their own family needs. The government now tried to lure peasants into producing and trading surpluses for consumer items, which were more widely available. The door opened for economic reforms allowing small-scale capitalism and private trading. However, the government still tried to retain ultimate power over the national economy by controlling the legal, financial, and banking systems; key industrial, transport, and construction enterprises; and sources of raw materials.

In the most important economic sector, agriculture, the government switched from emphasizing self-sufficiency in rice and widening the variety of crops grown, to a new policy of opening up agriculture to internal and international trade. The strategies for invigorating agriculture include decreasing bureaucratic regulations, building more roads and bridges, and selling more commercial fertilizers and seeds. Such changes make agriculture more of a business than a way of life.

Thai-Lao Relations

Relations between Thailand and Laos were unstable after the change of government in 1975. The exodus of Laotian refugees to camps in Thailand strained Laos' relations with Thailand. Thai communists had often been trained and supported from bases in Laos, but the crisis escalated in 1976 when a military dictatorship in Thailand persecuted left-wing students and political leaders, who then sought refuge in Laos. The Thais mounted an economic blockade that barred all legal trade with Laos.

After more moderate leaders came to power in Thailand, the Thai and Laotian governments agreed not to provide sanctuary for insurgent groups and instead to make the Mekong a "river of peace" and trade. Following the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, the Mekong peace was broken when Lao troops fired on Thai gunboats. Another Thai economic blockade cut off the important supply of Thai consumer goods to Laos in mid-1980, causing the Laotian government to quickly improve its road links with central Vietnam. Despite other shooting incidents between Thai and Laotians, the two countries have since pledged to upgrade relations, especially trade and commerce.

When the Lao government modified its economic policy to allow more private enterprise and trade, the Thai government and businesses were quick to seek opportunities in Laos. The Thai government views Laos as a springboard for Thai investment and marketing in Vietnam and Cambodia. Schemes to harness the immense potential of the Mekong for irrigation and electrical generation are part of an important dialogue between Laos and its Mekong neighbors.

Student Activities

A. Comprehension: Choose the correct answer.

1. After Kong Le's coup d'etat in 1960
a) Thailand blockaded its border with Laos
b) the USSR set up an embassy in Vientiane
c) the U.S. cut its cash grant aid to Laos
d) all of the above

2. The Pathet Lao were not
a) a Lao-American friendship association
b) an anti-American political and military force
c) a resistance government based in Sam Neua province
d) any of the above

3. The Soviet Union
a) was not concerned with anything that happened in Laos in the 1960s
b) proposed a cease-fire in Laos, followed by a peace conference in 1960
c) did not support plans for the 1960 cease-fire and peace conference
d) proposed a peace conference on Laos, but one did not occur

4. From 1955 to 1963, the largest part of U.S. aid to Laos was for
a) development grants and technical cooperation
b) budget support
c) military equipment
d) none of the above

5. The Ho Chi Minh trail was
a) an ancient trade route through mainland Southeast Asia
b) a hiking trail along the coast of Vietnam
c) a Vietnamese supply route in eastern Laos, heavily bombed by the U.S.
d) none of the above

6. The final cease-fire in the war in Laos went into effect in
a) February 1973
b) April 1975
c) May 1975
d) November 1975

7. After the new government took power in Laos in 1975, the Hmong
a) laid down their weapons and surrendered
b) were immediately integrated into the national government and army
c) continued fighting the new government
d) none of the above

8. After taking power, the new government
a) asked the king to abdicate
b) made food production an economic priority
c) put former government officials in reeducation camps
d) all of the above

9. The Lao government's new agricultural policies included
a) prohibiting hai farming
b) taxing farmers on their produce
c) promoting and organizing agricultural cooperatives
d) all of the above

10. The following was not a development priority for the new government
a) primary education and adult literacy
b) high technology manufacturing
c) improved water supplies and public health
d) building or repairing the transportation infrastructure

Matching: Match the name with the description.

1. Faydang
2. Richard Nixon
3. Kong Le
4. Vang Pao
5. Savang Vattana
6. Phoumi Nosavan
7. Kaysone Phomvihane
8. Lyndon Johnson
9. John F. Kennedy
10. Phoui Sananikone

a. Civilian prime minister of Laos during the early 1960s
b. General in the Royal Lao Army, supported by the U.S.
c. Organized a coup d'etat to try to make Laos politically neutral
d. Leader of Hmong troops trained by U.S. Special Forces; he fought on the side of the Royal Lao Army
e. Hmong leader who allied with the Pathet Lao
f. Faced with a political crisis in Laos, he put U.S. troops on alert and then agreed to a Second Geneva Peace Conference
g. Approved use of U.S. planes and bombing in the air war over Laos
h. The last king of Laos
i. Laotian communist who is currently president of Laos
j. President when the American air war in Laos become public

B. Read and Discuss:

> 'Goodbye my lovely little place, my little house and the land I used to live on and that raised me up. Goodbye my lovely pets and trees which I have raised until this night.' The sound of my crying became louder. I needed to stop but I could not. 'Goodbye Mother, Father, and all my brothers and sisters who gave me everything I needed.' I stood up, but did not know when I picked up the dust in my hands. I squeezed it tightly. I did not have a chance to get a hug or kiss- even a word of goodbye to my family. 'GO!'
>
> I laid myself down to the ground and started to crawl again. I moved very quickly from the backyard to another place. From my yard to the edge of the Mekong river was only about 100 yards, but I walked south of my village. If I went to the river directly I thought the communist soldiers might be waiting for me. Sometimes I walked, sometimes I ran. I arrived at the side of the river. The moon disappeared into the clouds, but I saw the way to go by the big lights the soldiers used to search the river. Every mile they had a small but very tall guard house with a big machine gun. They were ready all the time. The lights went around 50 yards apart. I sat beside a small bush and waited for a safe time to move.
>
> When I looked at the water it was very big and deep. The river was about two to three miles wide, and it moved 10 to 15 miles per hour. I was very worried about the distance and how I could get to Thailand. I did not want to swim, but I had to. Finally I got my chance! I moved to the river and started swimming. The last words I said were, 'Goodbye, my lovely country.'

The above is a teenager's description of his escape from Laos in December 1979 after he got in trouble with the government for organizing a protest strike at his school. He came to the U.S. in 1982.

1. If you disagree with the political system in the U.S., what options do you have? How are the rights to express yourself set in law and safeguarded?

2. Have you ever had to leave a place you love (i.e., a country, a town, a school)? What made the changes easier? What made the changes more difficult? What advice would you give to newcomers on how to adapt?

C. Class Discussion:

1. Do you know anyone who was involved in the U.S. war in mainland Southeast Asia (in Laos, Vietnam, or Cambodia)?

2. Before you read this book, did you have any impressions of that war? If so, describe your impressions and where you got them (i.e., movies, books, music, people, stories). Have your impressions remained the same or changed after reading this book? Explain.

D. Essay: How has the war during the 1960s-1970s affected Laos and Laotians? How do you think it has affected the United States?

E. Math Exercise: Using Table 6, answer the following questions.

1. In what year did the U.S. drop the largest amount of bombs on Laos?
2. Overall were more bombs dropped on northern Laos or on the Ho Chi Minh trail?
3. What per cent of the total U.S. bombs dropped in Indochina were dropped on Laos?
4. What was the average amount of bombs per year dropped on Laos?
5. Draw a bar or line graph to compare the amount of bombing in the two regions of Laos over the seven years.

Laos and Laotians Today

Adapting to a changing world

Politics in Laos

Many of the current and future issues facing Laos depend on the political choices of the country's leaders. Like the U.S.S.R. and East Bloc nations, Laos has slowed down the pace of its transition to socialism and substituted many reforms.

In 1988 the first elections since 1975 were held. In voting at the district level, there was an average of two candidates standing for each of the 2,410 seats on "People's Councils." In the provincial elections, 898 candidates competed for 651 positions. Elections for seventy-nine seats at the national level followed in 1989.

Although Laotians responded enthusiastically to the opportunity to vote, the elections were strictly controlled by the ruling government. All candidates had to be party-approved and seventy percent of those elected to the national Supreme People's Assembly were members of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party. No other parties are allowed to organize a challenge to the LPRP's power.

The legal framework for Laos' political system and economic structure was formalized in a new constitution announced in August 1991. The constitution, the first adopted since the kingdom of Laos was abolished in 1975, provides for the survival of the LPRP's leading role. However, other reforms show that the absolute power of the party is being trimmed. Previously there were two parallel administrative structures, one for the party and one for the government, with the latter dominated by the former. Now party committees have been set up as part of the government ministries instead of acting as overseers. Some say this reform may make provincial party officials cooperate more with national government bureaucrats, instead of trying to avoid national policies and laws:

> The insertion of the LPRP apparatchiks into the ministerial structure . . . is a device for ensuring that local party leaders will be obliged to cease unlawful and anti-national practices hitherto justified in some measure in the name of party power.

Many of the government ministry officials are young technocrats who are aware of the political reforms in Eastern Europe and keen to see similar changes in Laos. Even the Central Committee of the LPRP has been revitalized. Previously members were recognized more for their revolutionary credentials as guerrillas or ideologues than for their technical or management skills. Now almost fifty percent of the members are aged forty-eight or less, and more than 40% have university degrees or qualifications. Nevertheless, the future of political liberalization in Laos is not yet clear. Laotian students who supported a democracy movement calling for multiparty elections were arrested and sent for reeducation when they returned to Laos from Eastern Europe in late 1990.

Foreign Relations of the Lao PDR

The economic crisis in the U.S.S.R and Eastern Europe has affected Laos; foreign aid available from communist countries has been cut. In 1986 the U.S.S.R provided half of all foreign aid to Laos, but the Soviets can no longer afford to be so generous. Because Laos depends almost totally on international aid to pay for any development efforts, it has sought out new relations with other countries. From the mid-1980s Japanese aid grew quickly until Japan became Laos' largest noncommunist donor in 1988. Australia's contributions to the future of Laos have also increased in recent years. Vietnam continues to offer scholarships for Laotian students; in 1986 more than half of the Laotians in training abroad were studying in Vietnam. As relations with the People's Republic of China improve, Laos has been able to expand its exports to mountainous southern China, making the PRC its top export market. Thailand is strengthening its economic role in Laos by promising four million dollars of aid and exempting Laotian agricultural exports from taxes and duties.

Economic Issues

Laos' economy is at a crossroads. When the government previously tried policies that prioritized social equity, people were not motivated to work and produce to their full capabilities; most people remained "equally poor." With policies now emphasizing economic growth, people are producing but there is less attention paid to how wealth is distributed. Those left out of economic opportunities resent the privileges of the newly rich. The economic reforms have had a mixed effect:

> (A)lmost everybody was glad that the liberalization policies brought a degree of freedom in all aspects of social and economic life. Equally heartening for all too was the fact that the days of consumer shortages were over. The markets had become well-stocked with goods of a variety and quantity undreamt of two or three years ago. On the other hand, the rapid rise in prosperity of a few (people) in direct proportion to the increased unmet aspirations of the majority . . . heightened people's feelings of disgruntlement. When everybody was more or less equally poor or deprived, people viewed their deprivations and hardships with a degree of stoicism.

There are other economic issues for the government to consider. The current economic system favors those areas closest to the Mekong river, where travel is easiest and access to Thai markets is best. The development of the hinterland, or the mountain regions, is neglected except for logging and mining, mainly because there are less people living in these areas. Thus people from rural areas are tempted to migrate to the river cities to seek opportunities unavailable in their own communities. The growth of cities eventually leads to crowding and sanitation and housing problems, while the rural villages are left to the very old and very young.

Another important question is how much Laos can and should rely on foreign investors and organizations to direct development. International development banks and investors increasingly talk about Laos as a cheap source of raw resources, such as minerals, timber, electricity, and labor for Thailand. If Laos is delegated to the role of exporting primary resources rather than building up its own industries and services to process them, a lot of benefits like employment, tax revenues and profits will go to other countries. Another factor is Laos' vulnerability to price changes. For example, if Laos becomes dependent on Thailand for food imports, Laos' bargaining position is weakened. The Lao government and people experienced severe shortages when Thailand closed its border to trade in the 1970s. And what happens when Laos' minerals and trees run out?

Environmental Issues

Large-scale economic activities such as logging are becoming environmental issues for Laos. Wood, including valuable teak and rosewood, was Laos' top export earner even before the Thai government put an official ban on commercial logging in Thai forests in 1989. Since the ban the rush to cut Lao forests has escalated, leaving stumps where there were once rich rain forests alive with rare varieties of creatures and plants.

The commercial logging enterprises, in many cases run by provincial officials, are the main cause of rapid deforestation and erosion. Slash and burn farmers also contribute to the problem by burning the forest with large fires, which can get out of control. When the monsoon rains fall on bare ground, the soil is washed away, sometimes resulting in mudslides, and drinking water is polluted with dirt. The government response has been to try to resettle hill tribes into permanent villages in lowland areas.

Another environmental issue concerns large-scale hydroelectric projects. Huge dams and reservoirs, such as those suggested for the mighty Mekong river, threaten to displace villagers and flood acres of land. Although some of the benefits, such as providing electricity to rural areas, could be useful, most of the electricity will be exported to Thailand.

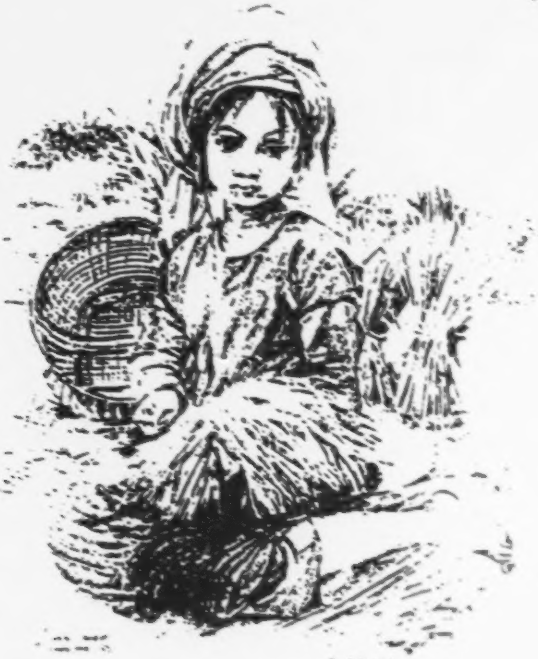
> Thailand is deterred from building such dams in Thailand itself because of the environmental costs. In seeking to have such dams built in Laos, Thailand is in a sense "exporting" an environmental problem to Laos and it is being questioned in Laos whether the price paid by Thailand for this Lao electricity is worth the environmental damages caused to Laos.

Today the Laotian government is using underwater frogmen to harvest the forests flooded by the hasty planning and implementation of the Nam Ngum dam in 1971.

Social Issues

All of the issues mentioned above concern what should be the main goal of any government: the well-being of its citizens. Despite its rich natural resources, Laos is listed among the world's ten poorest countries. Some Lao compare the country's situation to that of a skinny child dressed in rags, sitting on top of a locked chest filled with gold and riches. However, the treasure chest cannot be opened without keys; the keys are education, food production, roads, and communications.

Almost half of Laos' population is under fifteen years of age. The government gave high priority to educating these youngsters and their families, at least until recently. By 1985 only eight percent of men between fifteen and forty-five years of age could not read. About twenty-four percent of women in the same age group were illiterate, as compared to a much higher figure prior to 1975. However, budget concerns have limited the government's ability to make progress in providing social services such as education and public health. The rapid expansion of the education system after 1975 led to problems: poorly qualified and low-paid teachers, inadequate buildings, shortages of textbooks and supplies, and a high dropout rate. The World Bank and Asian Development Bank have made education a priority in their funding for development projects in Laos.



Laos ~ Lao childhood during harvest time ©Malinka Luangpraseut, 1987 [illegible]

Public health services, like those offered by local clinics and provincial hospitals, have been severely affected by budget cuts. More than three thousand public health workers were laid off in 1989. With severe health concerns such as malaria, Laotians cannot afford to ignore the need for improved health and sanitation. In 1990 the average Laotian man could only expect to live to be forty-six years old. A Laotian woman could expect to live a year less. In the U.S. the average life expectancy for men is seventy-two years, and seventy-nine years for women. Ten percent of the children born in Laos die before they reach their first birthday because of poor nutrition and disease.

Statistics show there is a great need for public health services, but it is expensive to provide services in rural areas because of isolation and low population density. However, if Laos wants to improve its agricultural production and ensure adequate food for the nation, the living standards of country people, the backbone of the country, must improve.

That Lao women live a year less than men indicates how much harder life is for females. Women carry the heavy responsibilities of fieldwork, housework, and childbearing. In some areas of the country, village women have an average of ten babies during their short lives, with an average of three children surviving. Some communities and offices have tried to ease the mother's burden by organizing daycare for children, but such services are still rare. One clear sign of sexual inequality in Laos is the small number of women pursuing education at high school and higher levels.

U.S.-Lao Relations

Although the U.S. broke diplomatic ties with the new communist governments that took power in Vietnam and Cambodia in 1975, a small American diplomatic mission remained in Laos. The embassy in Vientiane, staffed by less than a dozen Americans, has been the only permanent U.S. presence in Indochina since the war ended in 1975. Relations between the two countries have sometimes been strained and tense, but both sides agreed to keep channels of communication open for resolving important issues.

The top issue on the American agenda for Laos is to discover what happened to American military men, mostly U.S. Air Force and Navy fliers, who disappeared or went "missing in action" (M.I.A.) during the second Indochina War. In many cases, fellow aviators saw the lost men's planes crash on Lao territory, but bodies were not recovered. More than two thousand Americans are listed as M.I.A. in Southeast Asia. Officially 528 American servicemen have still not returned from Laos. Some are presumed killed in action, while the fate of others is unresolved. The remains of more than a dozen Americans have been recovered and identified by the U.S. Army's Central Identification Laboratory, located in Honolulu, Hawaii.

The Lao government has been increasingly helpful in trying to find and identify American remains in Laos. In 1985 U.S. military personnel went for the first time to Laos to explore the crash site of an American plane lost during the war. Other American scientists and soldiers have since traveled to Laos to try to unravel the mystery of the missing men. In 1991 the U.S. donated a primary school building to Savannakhet province in appreciation for help in looking for M.I.A. remains.

Another area of official cooperation between the Lao and American governments has been bilateral aid. Private American citizens have supported nongovernment aid programs in Laos, such as those run by Mennonites and Quakers. There was no American government aid to Laos from 1975 to 1987 when the U.S. government sent five thousand tons of rice to feed Laotians suffering from a drought. Two years later a renewed aid relationship stalled when the U.S. government accused Laotian government officials of making money from the growing and export of opium, which drug addicts use as heroin. Recently official relations have improved to the point where the U.S. is funding projects to encourage opium growers in Houaphan province to farm crops other than poppies.

International relations are improving on the cultural level also. In July 1991 a hula dance troupe from Hawaii performed to sell-out audiences in Vientiane. It was the first U.S. cultural presentation in Laos since 1974. The standing room only crowd was believed to be the largest ever at the Vientiane theater.

In recent years it has been easier to travel between Laos and the United States. In 1989 more than two thousand people from Laos, including scholars, businessmen, government officials, and family relations, visited the United States. Some former Laotian refugees, now U.S. citizens, are now crossing the Mekong river to bring news and gifts to their relatives in Laos.

Some Laotian expatriates think the time has come for refugees to reinvest in their homeland. These overseas Laotians say they still consider themselves "the sons and daughters" of Laos and have a moral obligation to help their homeland. One former Lao refugee who is now a businessman in the U.S., described how Lao-Americans could get involved:

> (T)he biggest lack (in Laos) is human resources- the engineers, architects, accountants, managers, investors and entrepreneurs who can deal with the characteristics of a market economy. . . . There is a vast pool of untapped human resources in the Indochinese community worldwide. It is time for reconciliation, time to restore trust and mobilize Indochinese resources, both domestic and overseas, to meet the challenge of development in Indochina.

Laotians Abroad

It is estimated that about ten percent of Laos' population left the country after the change in government in 1975. Most of the early emigrants were Lao Loum or Lao Sung who feared discrimination or persecution from the new regime because of their association with the royal government during the war. The U.S. accepted many, and others went on to new lives in Australia, Canada, and France. Most Hmong refugees came to the U.S. and settled in California, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Montana, North Carolina, and Wisconsin. Some Hmong have continued their traditions while living new lives carved from South American jungles in Argentina and French Guyana.

In early 1991 there were about sixty-five thousand Laotians living in refugee camps in Thailand, with little hope of being resettled in foreign countries. In the past, Thai officials have refused Laotian (especially Hmong) refugees and forced them back across the border. The Thai and Laotian governments are now publicizing a gentler policy of returning Laotian refugees who volunteer. In 1989 about fifteen hundred Laotians were resettled in Laos after returning from refugee camps in Thailand. It is estimated that more than fifty-one hundred Laotians, mostly Lao Loum, have been repatriated with United Nations assistance. Those remaining in Thailand live a limited existence in cramped camps.

Not all Laotian refugees have adapted to exile. During the 1980s there has been sporadic guerrilla warfare in Laos by Laotians, mostly Hmong, who operate out of camps in Thailand. In December 1989 a group calling itself the United Lao National Liberation Front proclaimed its resistance government, challenging the existing Laotian government. Supported by Laotian refugees who are homesick and frustrated by the problems of adapting to foreign societies, this group is trying regain a place in Laos by using military force. One Laotian explains why others are willing to fight to return to Laos:

> You see, for my people, their land is sacred. Our ancestors are buried on that land and they are part of our life. To disturb this is very dangerous, it threatens our lives and the future of new generations; that is why they want so hard to get back. I understand this passion, I understand what they want to do. For us it (the Indochina War) was more than a military event, an engagement, a conflict a war- whatever you want to call it. It was our present and our future. That is something very precious.

Claiming to have an armed force of ten thousand men and operating a clandestine radio station that broadcasts anticommunist propaganda, the guerrillas fought government forces in the Vientiane region in early 1990.

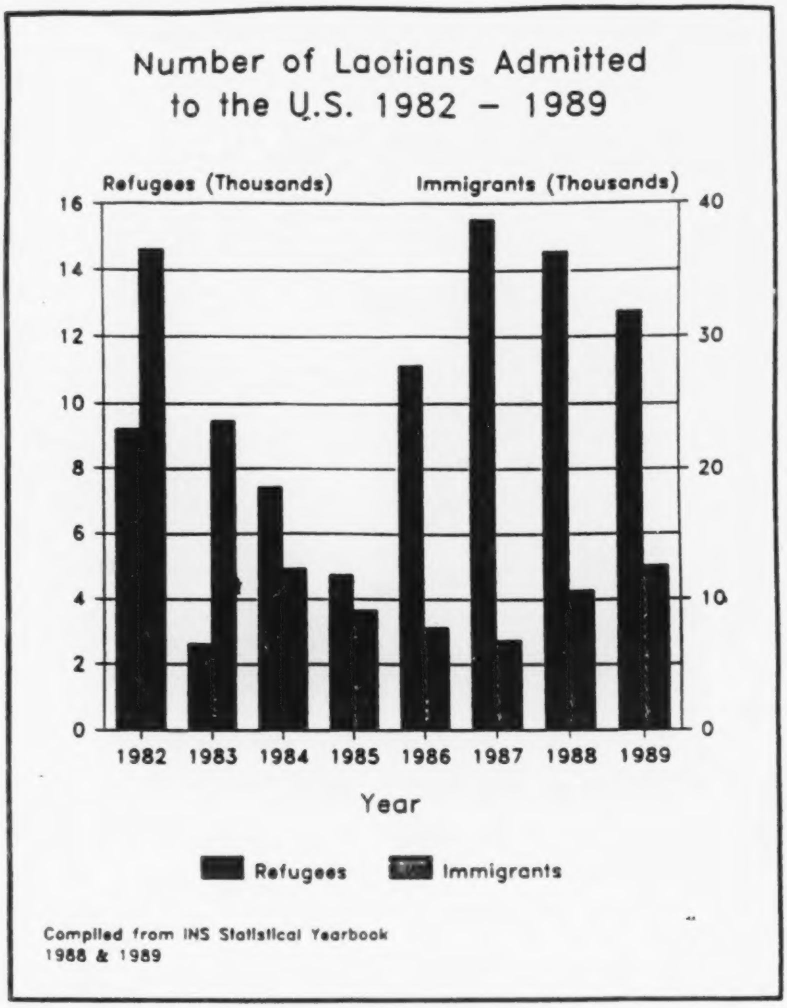
Laotian-Americans

Some Laotians in the U.S. actively support the resistance movement, while others are more concerned with life in America. Laotians coming to the U.S. fall into two categories. The first are immigrants, or those who leave Laos looking for a better life, perhaps following relatives abroad to seek better opportunities for education and work. The other half are refugees, who left after they were persecuted by the government of Laos because of their political views, religion, ethnicity, or other differences.

The experience of coming as a refugee to America is distinct from that of an immigrant. For immigrants, even while their bodies are yet in the old country, their hearts and hopes are already focused on their destination. The sentiments of refugees are usually just the opposite. With little time to plan or prepare for departure, very often refugees find themselves physically in a new country while their thoughts and dreams linger in the homeland. A former soldier in the Royal Lao Army who is now a church janitor in Atlanta describes his mixed feelings:

It was a good life in Laos and I miss my country very much . . . We left so quickly. We just locked the door and left. We don't know about our possessions or our house. I hope it is still there. I think about relatives and friends. Every time the news talks about the war and the Thai/Laos border problems, I worry about my brother left there. I am sure others do the same. I fought very hard for my country, and now all of that is gone and it will not come back. It is very sad, very sad.

There is nothing I wish to do here. Why should I? I do not have my heart here. My family soon will become U.S. citizens and they have new lives here. All of that is good and they start new lives. I will be happy for them . . . When I first started this work, the tears went into the toilet, I was so sad. There is not much else I can do here in America. What do they do with a soldier who has no country? What could they educate me to be? I don't know.


Number of Laotians Admitted to the U.S. 1982 - 1989

Compiled from INS Statistical Yearbook
1988 & 1989

For adults, learning a new, difficult language and culture can seem an impossible challenge. Parents must learn to accommodate their children's independence and individualism. Husbands must accept their wives' new roles as economic providers and decision-makers because it is often easier for the women to find low-skilled (and low-paying) jobs. Youth must find a way to learn and balance a new American identity with respect for their ancestors' cultural legacy. Some feel caught between the customs of their parents and American habits:

> The Laotians never touch, and for us a kiss on the face or slap on the back is very rude . . . In Laos, waving to call a person is a sign of contempt, and to wave to someone waving palm outward in the American fashion is rude . . . It is also considered rude to sit with your feet pointed straight out at another person or to put your feet on furniture pointing at someone . . . Some of the Laotian customs I can use in my own way and some I must forget . . . To me, adjusting and starting over in San Antonio has been a matter of coping with all the different meanings of things that are confusing and different. When you learn something a certain way, it is difficult to change and do it some other way.

There is also the challenge for Laotian-American young people to seek out or create opportunities to improve themselves through higher education, entrepreneurship, and community service. Often their parents cannot help because they cannot speak much English or do not understand how the American education system works.

Sometimes economic, social, and psychological stress causes unexpected things to occur. A mysterious illness has claimed the life of more than a hundred young and apparently healthy Southeast Asian men in the U.S. The friend of one Hmong victim in Seattle describes the Sudden Unexplained Death Syndrome:

> He had been working in the garden all morning, took a shower and rested on his bed and never woke up. His wife and children said that they never heard any noise, no cries or anything. It was just that one moment he was alive, and the next moment he was dead . . . We call them the 'sleeping people,' and the fear of the Hmong people is that if we talk about it, then we get it too-sleep and never wake up. The medical people say that maybe the reason is stress, that there is trauma that these people have

> gone through and that something happens to their system here. It dies. But we do not believe this. So many guesses and magic. The shamans in one community spend a lot of time dealing with spirits that have caused the deaths, maybe that is the reason.

Conclusion

An estimated 270,000 Laotians have resettled in the U.S. from 1981 to 1989. They have faced great challenges, a few of which were described above. Young Laotians have become young Laotian-Americans. The journey from the hills and valleys of Laos to the cities and states of America has been long and demanding. Now a part of one of the largest and most diverse countries on earth, Laotian-Americans are contributing their unique experiences and cultures to the human experiment that is the United States of America.

Student Activities:

A. Comprehension: Choose the correct answer.

1. The Lao People's Revolutionary Party is
a) the ruling communist party in Laos
b) an outlawed opposition party
c) the name of a popular Vientiane nightclub
d) an assembly of popularly elected representatives

2. The Lao People's Democratic Republic got its constitution in
a) 1960
b) 1975
c) 1985
d) 1991

3. Recently Laos' economy has been greatly affected by
a) cuts in foreign aid from the U.S.S.R and Eastern Europe
b) cuts in American aid donations
c) cuts in Thai trade with Laos
d) cuts in Japanese trade and aid

4. Development in Laos today favors
a) regions bordering Vietnam
b) urban areas along the Mekong river
c) rural areas in northern Laos
d) rural areas bordering Cambodia

5. The portion of Laos' population under 15 years of age is
a) 20%
b) 33%
c) 50%
d) 60%

6. Deforestation in Laos is increasing because of
a) population growth in Laos
b) the Thai government's ban on commercial logging in Thailand
c) forest fires
d) all of the above

7. In 1990 the average life expectancy for women in Laos was
a) the same as Lao men
b) less than for Lao men
c) more than for Lao men
d) more than for American women

8. M.I.A. stands for
a) Missionaries' International Assistance
b) Medical Instruction Agency
c) Missing In Action
d) none of the above

9. An estimated __ of Laos' population has left Laos since 1975.
a) 5%
b) 10%
c) 25%
d) 30%

10. The country that has resettled the most Laotians since 1975 is
a) the United States
b) France
c) Australia
d) Canada

B. Read and Discuss:

"Lao Hospitality" by a Laotian farmer in Fresno, California

> Come and take rice.
> That is the Lao greeting of welcome.
> Take rice with pa dek and we will talk.
> I remember Vientiane and my family that for so long
> I know nothing about.
> I live here in Fresno with other lowland people,
> but I dream of my city that as a child
> I knew from darkness to light.
> I miss the familiar streets that were always filled
> with the people that my family knew for many, many
> generations. Now, all that is only dust
> and my dreams become distant.
> I work on a farm here in Fresno. It is very hard work.
> There are many here who live like I do- with memories
> and the dust of their dreams is what we work with
> in the fields each day. Dust that fills the fields
> with all of our secrets and memories of a life
> we no longer will know.
> Now come and take rice.

"Laotian Memories" by a Laotian woman, more than eighty years old, living in Philadelphia

It is May in Laos and the rainy season has begun.
I miss the rice planting.
The holiday, Bounpha Vet celebration, I think of today.
On that day we celebrated the many lives of Buddha
before he found enlightenment.

I, too, see the many lives I must go through.
Life now has been so much movement. Noise.
Moving, moving, always moving.
My next life, maybe, will be more peaceful.
I am very old.

"New Life" by a Laotian girl, age fourteen, in St. Paul, Minnesota

Minnesota is a new life and place for me.
It brings surprises for my friends and me everyday.
Our parents looked for freedom for all of us
and we came to America;
Freedom for our hearts and our minds.

We walk now through shopping malls, not fields of oxen.
Without grandparents life is without history
of our days before we came,
Like reading a book in school but pages are missing.

We speak of home but know this is our home now,
America. Like rustling leaves I gather in the fall
in Minnesota, the winter brings spring
and the seasons remain but the forest
has unfamiliar trees and the harvest
is with different fruit.

a) How do you think each poet feels?
b) What differences between life in Laos and in America do they mention?
c) How is the last poem different from the first two poems?

C. Creative Writing: Imagine that you have had to leave your country. Write a poem or essay to express what you would or would not miss.

D. Graph Exercise: Answer the following questions, based on the graph titled "Number of Laotians Admitted to the U.S., 1982-1989."

1. In what year did most Laotian refugees come?
2. In what year did most Laotian immigrants come?
3. What does the graph show about the trend of immigrants compared to the trend of refugees admitted?
4. Was the number of refugees admitted in 1987 more or less than the number of immigrants admitted in 1983?
5. In what year(s) was the number of Laotian immigrants and refugees closest?

E. Discuss and Write:

1. What do you think are the most serious challenges facing Laos today? Based on all that you have read in this book, what are the strengths of the Laotian people that may help them face such problems?

2. Both Laos and the United States are countries with many peoples from different cultures.
a) What problems and opportunities arise when there are a variety of cultures in one country?
b) How do governments deal with cultural diversity? Give examples from different places.
c) How can we encourage harmony and tolerance in a multicultural country?

Laos – Lao women and their clothes

©Hatinka Luangpraseut, 1987. [illegible]

Glossary

ENGLISH TERMS

Animists believe that inanimate objects and natural phenomena have souls. Many Laotians respect the spirits of trees, rivers, or other landmarks.

Aid is economic, social, or military assistance given to a country by another government, international institution, or private organization.

Autonomy is the power or right of a group of people to consider themselves distinct and to determine for themselves the kind of state in which they will live and its form of government.

Batik is a type of cloth woven from hemp or cotton. Designs are drawn on the cloth with wax before dyeing.

Betel refers to the leaves of a climbing plant mixed with lime and chewed by people in Asia and the Pacific.

Bombie, also known as a cluster bomb unit (CBU), consists of small, deadly bombs.

Brahmanism is the religious and social system of the Brahmans, the priestly caste of India.

Buddhism is a religious philosophy that was founded in northern India in the sixth century B.C. Buddha taught that the ideal state of nirvana could be reached by right living and believing and by achieving peace of mind through meditation.

Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) is the principal organization of the U.S. government for gathering and analyzing information to conduct secret operations in foreign countries.

Coalition government is a government in which several minority parties form the cabinet, giving no single party a majority.

Colonialism is the rule of an area and its people by an external power in order to acquire economic advantage, military security, or international prestige for the external power.

Command economy is a planned economy where the central government, instead of private business, controls economic decision-making and the means of production, such as land, banking, communications, transportation, etc.

Cooperatives are associations of individuals who share labor and costs in an economic endeavor.

Counterinsurgency means policies and programs, both military and civilian, used to oppose revolts against an established government. .

Coup d'etat is an unexpected and sometimes violent takeover of a government, often by the military.

French Union was created by the French Constitution of 1946 to give a "voice" to France's overseas colonies and territories. However, it was ineffectual because it underrepresented the overseas possessions and lacked influence over the French government and National Assembly.

Glutinous rice, also known as sticky rice, is the favorite food of Laotians. It needs to be steamed once in the morning and will last all day, packed in a woven basket. Sticky rice is also very filling, making up ninety percent of the average Laotian diet.

Hmong are members of a tribal group who migrated from southern China to the highlands of Laos in the nineteenth century.

Ikat is an intricate fabric pattern created by laying out thread and tying it into color patterns before dyeing and weaving.

Indigenous refers to the original or first known inhabitants of a place.

Indirect rule is a colonial system that relies on local people serving as administrators and limits contact between colonials and subjects.

Indochina Communist Party (ICP) was established in 1930 as an underground organization to promote communism and anticolonialism in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.

Infrastructure consists of the economic, political, and social foundations that support a society's efforts to improve. It may refer to physical infrastructure, such as roads, dams, and electricity, or social infrastructure, such as schools and hospitals.

Karma is the Buddhist law of cause and effect. Some people think of it as punishment or reward for actions performed in former lives.

Khmer empire was the civilization that dominated the Mekong basin from the ninth to thirteenth centuries. A blend of indigenous and imported Indian cultures, the Khmer empire is best remembered for its remarkable feats in hydraulic engineering and monumental stone temples known as Angkor.

Malaria is a disease introduced into the blood by the bite of an infected female mosquito. Its symptoms are chills, fever and sweating. An infected person can die.

Martial law is the temporary rule by military forces over citizens.

Marxist-Leninism is a political doctrine based on Karl Marx's socialist theories as practiced by the Bolsheviks and Communist Party in the Soviet Union under the Russian leader Lenin.

Messianic describes a religious movement or leader who promises to liberate a country or people.

Mon-Khmer refers to an ethnic grouping ranging from Burma through central Thailand to Cambodia.

Monopoly means the exclusive control of buying, selling, or making a product, service, or process. A monopoly allows those in control to fix prices and eliminate competition.

Monsoon is a seasonal wind that greatly influences the climate of Asia, blowing from the southwest in summer and the northwest in winter.

Mulberry is a type of tree or shrub that produces leaves eaten by silkworms.

Nationalism is the spirit of belonging together that seeks to preserve group identity by institutionalizing it as a state. Nationalism may be based on the common bonds of ethnicity, language, history, or religion.

Neutrality in foreign affairs means a policy of independence or non-alignment in a power conflict, e.g. Switzerland during World War II, or what Laos was attempting during the Cold War.

Opium is the milky sap from the pod of the poppy flower. Its tar can be smoked or refined into powerful narcotics, such as heroin or morphine.

Pali is the classical language in which the holy books of Theravada Buddhism are written. Lao Buddhist books and prayers are in Pali.

Politburo is the leading policy-forming committee of ruling communist parties.

Reeducation is an effort to change a person's thinking or political views to conform to what a regime wants. The reeducation routine usually consists of obtaining a confession of "wrong-doing" (self-criticism) followed by repeated instruction that is reinforced with punishment (hard work, isolation) for relapses and reward for acceptable behavior.

Refugee is a person who is expelled or flees from his or her country of nationality or residence owing to fear of persecution for reasons of religion, nationality, membership in a social or ethnic group, or political opinion.

Romanized means written in the alphabet that you are now reading.

Sampan is a small flat-bottomed Asian boat.

Sangha is the Pali word for Buddhist monks and their community.

Shaman is a person with special magical powers who communicates with spirits to heal or protect humans.

Slash and burn agriculture, also known as shifting cultivation or swidden agriculture, is the traditional method of growing crops in Laos. A plot is cleared in the forest, usually on hillsides or mountain peaks. It is burned (the ashes act as fertilizer) and planted for several consecutive years before being abandoned to let the soil recover.

Stupa is a towerlike Buddhist monument that usually contains religious relics.

Subsistence economy is an economy in which families consume what they produce, instead of earning cash by selling their labor or produce to buy goods and services. For example, a Laotian family tries to grow enough food to eat, cotton for clothes, and tobacco for smoking for themselves. If there is a surplus, they may trade or sell it.

T'ai is the name given a broad ethnic grouping found in mainland Southeast Asia and southern China. T'ai are characterized by monosyllabic, tonal languages and cultural practices such as tattooing, using cattle or buffalo as measures of status, and living on houses raised above the ground.

Taoism is one of the main religious philosophies of China. It teaches that happiness can be found through harmony with nature.

Theravada is also known as the southern school of Buddhism and is practiced in Sri Lanka, Burma, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand.

United States Agency for International Development (USAID) was created in 1961 to administer American economic and technical assistance to foreign countries.

Vassal refers to a ruler or state that owes money or other valuables to a more powerful ruler or state to show submission or as a price for peace and protection.

Viet Minh was a popular political and military front created by Ho Chi Minh in 1941 to attract patriotic Vietnamese to fight against the French and other foreign powers in Indochina.

LAO TERMS:

Hai refers to upland farming fields.

Khaen refers to a bamboo wind instrument, similar to panpipes, played by Laotian boys and men.

Khun Borom is the legendary ancestor of the Lao, who is said to have descended from heaven.

Lam vong is the traditional Laotian folk dance, a symbol of the joy and unity of Laotians.

Lan Xang ("Million Elephants") was an ancient kingdom in Laos, lasting from A.D. 1353 to 1698. It ruled over the present territory of Laos as well as parts of Thailand and Cambodia, and fostered what is considered the "Golden Age" of Laos.

Lao Issara means "Free Lao" and refers to the Laotian nationalist movement that established the first postcolonial government in Laos in 1945. After the French returned, the Laos Issara fought to regain independence.

Matanyom refers to junior secondary school.

Naga is a mythical dragon/snake believed to live in the Mekong and other bodies of water in mainland southeast Asia.

Pathet Lao means "Lao Country" and is the name for the Laotian political/military movement established in 1950. It allied with the Viet Minh to fight against the French and later against the American-supported Royal Lao Government.

Seminaa is another term for reeducation. Derived from the English word "seminar".

Sinh is the traditional skirt worn by Lao women. Wrapped and secured at the waist by a belt, it is characterized by a band of contrasting fabric sewn around the bottom.

Thewada means celestial maidens or angels.

Wai is the traditional Lao greeting of respect. The junior person (i.e., younger or of lower social status) initiates the wai by raising both hands together in front of the face. The degree of respect is demonstrated by the level of the hands (a Buddhist monk, for example, is greeted with the thumbs held at approximately eyebrow-level) and how low the person bows his or her head.

Wat refers to a Buddhist temple.

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"A Journey to Laos." Produced by Southeast Asia Resource Center, Washington, D.C., 1986. One 1/2-inch videocassette (45 minutes), VHS format. Former American volunteers in Laos return for a three-week journey through Laos, examining conditions. Recommended to supplement Chapters 1, 6, or 7.

"Becoming American." New Day Films, Franklin, N.J., 1982. 16 mm film (58 minutes), one reel. "Follows a Hmong refugee family from northern Laos awaiting resettlement in a remote refugee camp in Northern Thailand, from the time its members learn of their acceptance as immigrants, to the time they are settled in Seattle, WA." Recommended to supplement Chapters 6 or 7.

"Blue Collar and Buddha." Filmakers Library, New York, 1987. One 1/2-inch videocassette (57 minutes), VHS format. "Explores the dilemma of Laotian refugees living in Rockford, Illinois, who are torn between preserving their cultural identity and adapting to their new life in America. Resettlement is complicated by rising tensions with working-class neighbors, many of who resent the Laotians' economic gains and view their Buddhism with hostility." Candidly discusses the issues of racism and tolerance in American society. Recommended to supplement Chapters 1 or 7.

"Cambodia and Laos; Peace is at Hand, 1968-1973." WGBH Educational Foundation, Boston, 1987. One 1/2-inch videocassette (2 hours), VHS format. Episodes 9-10 of the television program "Vietnam, a Television History." Discusses Vietnam's smaller and technically neutral neighbors. Shows how both were drawn into a wider Indochinese conflict . . ." Spends less than 10 minutes dealing with Laos, but has good documentary footage of American training and supplying of the Hmong troops, aerial footage of Laos and bomb damage. Also discusses the Lam Son 719 military operations on the Ho Chi Minh trail in southern Laos in 1971. To save time, preview the tape and cue it to the sections relevant to Laos. Recommended to supplement Chapters 5 or 6.

"Moving Mountains: The story of the Yiu Mien." Producer/Director: Elaine Velazquez. Filmakers Library, New York, 1989. One 1/2-inch videocassette (58 minutes). Focuses on the Mien hilltribe of Laos and the problems they face adjusting to life in the U.S. after the Vietnam War. Uses narrative by Mien people to tell their own story. Plenty of good footage of the Mien lifestyle in the mountains of Laos, and briefly mentions their military training by the U.S. for the anticommunist struggle. Also documents their exodus and experiences in Thai refugee camps. The footage of Mien in America uses many interviews with old and young, male and female Mien refugees. Issues covered included: culture shock; generation gaps; family conflict and divorce; loss/adaptation of traditional culture (i.e., conversion to Christianity from Mien ancestor worship and shamanism); employment and lifestyle (change from subsistence to cash economy); loneliness and isolation of the old people, and opportunities for the young. The film documents a 3-day marriage ceremony, a ceremony for the dead, Mien at work and play in the U.S. An excellent film that gives a strong impression of the contrasts between life in Laos and the U.S., and the courageous adaptation of the Mien refugees. Recommended to supplement Chapters 3 or 7.

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Answers

Chapter One

Fill in the blanks: 1. landlocked 2. Land of a Million Elephants 3. to 7. China, Burma, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand (in any order) 8. Thailand 9. Mekong 10. Annamite

Multiple choice: 1)c 2)a 3)b 4)b 5)c 6)a 7)c 8)c 9)b 10)a

Chapter Two

Multiple choice: 1)c 2)b 3)d 4)a 5)d 6)b 7)d 8)d 9)a 10)c

Chapter Three

Multiple choice: 1)b 2)a 3)d 4)b 5)d 6)c 7)b 8)d 9)a 10)c

Chapter Four

Multiple choice: 1)b 2)c 3)a 4)d 5)d 6)b 7)c 8)d 9)a 10)b
Matching: 1)d 2)a 3)j 4)f 5)c 6)i 7)b 8)e 9)h 10)g

Chapter Five

Multiple choice: 1)d 2)c 3)d 4)b 5)a 6)c 7)b 8)b 9)d 10)a
Matching: 1)h 2)d 3)j 4)c 5)e 6)i 7)a 8)g 9)f 10)b

Chapter Six

Multiple choice: 1)d 2)a 3)b 4)b 5)c 6)a 7)c 8)d 9)d 10)b
Matching: 1)e 2)j 3)c 4)d 5)h 6)b 7)i 8)g 9)f 10)a
Math: 1) 1969 2) The HCM trail 3) 26% 4) 234,857 tons

Chapter Seven

Multiple choice: 1)a 2)d 3)a 4)b 5)c 6)d 7)b 8)c 9)b 10)a
Graph: 1) 1987 2) 1982 3) The number of immigrants decreased while the number of refugees increased. 4) Less 5) 1989